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A HORRID GIRL



By the Author of
"MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT"⁷&c



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A HORRID GIRL.

A NOVEL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT," &c.

"Some say thy fault is youth, some wantonness,
Some say thy grace is youth and gentle sport."
SHAKESPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON: RICHARD BENTLEY & SON,
NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

1876.

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251. d. 546.

A HORRID GIRL.

CHAPTER I.

GILLESPIE'S MANUSCRIPT.

"Oh! he hath drawn my picture in his letter!"

LOVE'S LABOUR LOST

LIZ was in bed—fast asleep, if I might judge by the magnificent solo she was performing—what common natures would call a snore. I sat by the fire, warmly wrapt up, with my feet on the fender, and began to peruse Gillespie's Ghost Story. The undertaking

was by no means an easy one. The scrawl was something fearful; and, every now and then there came a hopeless confusion of blots, erasures, interlining, that made me fling down the pages in despair.

But when "need is highest, help is highest," and occasionally, one or two of such pages had been apparently re-copied in a fair, bold handwriting, which was very easy and pleasant to read, and helped me on wonderfully. Still, the story itself was so exceedingly mysterious and complicated, that I grew sleepy over it, and was just about to throw it aside, when I came suddenly upon two or three more pages in the clear handwriting, which, I thought, I might as well finish reading before I retired, to do my part in making Lizzie's "solo" a "duet."

I had not read more than a line or two, when I at once perceived that

between the matter of the old pages, and that of the new ones, there was "a solution of continuity." That did not matter much ; poor Willie's story had so little interest in it so far, that possibly, incoherence would do it no harm. So I read on—stopped—turned over the sheets—read again. What was this? Some jest of Willie's, or of Captain Brancepeth's? It was not the ghost story, anyhow. Here is the verbatim transcript of what I read

"——these sketches. Well, now I come to the last batch—three girls—mess-mates, who share the same suite of apartments; and two of them (though they are not related) the same room. Of the eldest, I do not wish to say more than that she is a fine girl, clever, spirited, accomplished; an heiress too, it is said—let us turn her picture face to the wall for

the present. The next is a clergyman's daughter, a good-natured, bouncing lass; handsome and good, I think; but she has only eyes for an old play-fellow, and family connection of hers, who is also on a visit here; so you may pity her want of taste, little mother, and pass on to the third, and last on the list of maidens fair and foul, who grace Lady Waldron's circle.

"This girl is the orphan daughter of an officer who died in one of our colonies where, I believe, she was born. She is, though not portionless, certainly no heiress; nor, though quite a gentlewoman, has her education (I use the word in its fullest meaning,) been altogether such as a careful mother would have chosen for her. She is very young, very world ignorant, quite 'unformed,' as you would say. Yes! 'unformed,' as the unopened rosebud which

is sweeter in its promise, than is the fulfilled perfection of the rose! Not that *this* rose-bud is perfect—very far from it! You, mother, would say so, more emphatically than I can, because even the gentlest women are severer critics of their sister-women than men ever are.

“But how can I describe her, so as to bring her with any distinctness before you? I could say she is slightly, but exquisitely formed; she has a brilliant complexion, with a carnation bloom; bright dark eyes; a lovely mouth, all alive with merry dimples; and a wealth of shining hair. But this would be no description of her. Hundreds of girls have these attractions also. As well could I describe a humming bird by enumerating the tints of its plumage. I cannot show you how the pure blush fades or deepens with

every transient emotion; how the bright eyes laugh and sparkle with innocent archness, or soften in their limpid depths, with easily awakened, but fleeting sensibility.

“I cannot make you hear the ringing music of her girlish gaiety, so frank, yet so modest, as the mirthfulness of her sweet childhood is sometimes restrained by, and sometimes overpowers, the dawning reserve of her sweeter womanhood! Hold there! I hear you cry, ‘my Sailor Poet, you are caught at last!’ No, mother, not so—if I have lingered too lovingly on charms which might have been—but cannot be—more to me than the colours of a beautiful portrait that can never be mine—it is to prove to you that your warning has been——”

Here the M.S. came to a full stop. I turned over the other pages, looked


about to see if I had dropped any—shook them. No! there was absolutely no more!

My first impression on reading these lines had been that they were intended for a jesting portraiture of me and my “mess-mates,” slipped into Willie’s M.S. either by himself, or Captain Brancepeth, to furnish a subject for future raillery. But a second perusal convinced me that it was a *bonâ-fide* sketch—possibly part of a letter that Gillespie had taken up by mistake from his friend’s desk with his own papers.

Had I suspected this at first, I should have felt no temptation even to glance at it; but having innocently read it, and recognised myself as being the subject of it, I should be more than human—female human, at least—if I could have desisted from its perusal—aye, and its re-perusal

until I had almost got it by heart. And then I leaned both arms on the table, and my head on both my hands, and fell to ruminating. I was not thinking of the flattering picture—was it so very flattering? I knew I had bright eyes, and dimples, and all the rest of it, before the “Sailor Poet” wrote of them.

You all used to tell me that I was very pretty, ages ago—and that is a fact which, once confirmed, is seldom forgotten, I think? Still, I was glad—I was proud, even, that the “Sailor Poet” should admire me so much, as by his letter he evidently did; and, for a moment, my foolish heart beat high with triumph, and then stopped and ticked quite dull and low! “Might—but can never be—” “can never be more—” Why? Is the fault in me? Is the check on *his* side? What “warning” is that—



As I mused, a hand suddenly reached over my shoulder, snatched away the paper on which my eyes were fixed ; and when I turned, half startled, and wholly angry, to reclaim it, I beheld Gabrielle Delmar, who had stolen softly behind me from the outer room, and now stood, holding it high above my reach, and laughing coldly, in her way, at my fruitless efforts to take it from her.

"There! take it!" she said, at last, throwing it on the table. "I have read every word of it over your shoulder—however you came by it! I believe Captain Brancepeth is no great *parti*—he has only his pay—and Admiral Brancepeth is likely to keep him out of his inheritance for many a long year yet. Still, he has birth and position—and you might do worse."

"Nonsense, Ella! How did you

come — and why — so late, into my room ?”


“ I saw your light burning through the door, you, in your abstraction, had left ajar. I *am* late to-night ; but I have been writing letters of my own—not reading other people’s.”

I fancied she said this with a slight sneer, and I hastened to explain my rather equivocal action.

“ Nay,” she rejoined, laughing, “ I cannot think that much excuse is called for—and, doubtless, the Captain will be ready to forgive you.”

“ Oh, Ella ! as if I could ever let him know that I had seen this—never ! never !”

“ If you accept him, you will tell him all—after the manner of young girls. But perhaps you don’t mean to take him after all !”



"I shall never have the opportunity of accepting or refusing. You see what he says himself."

"Oh, that counts for nothing—some fantastic 'warning' of Madame Mère's. You must be a little goose if you cannot wile him into forgetfulness of *that*. You have won the gallant warrior and you should prove your power."

"What can he mean, I wonder, by saying it can never be—because *I* might not choose it to be—but he could not tell that until he asked me; and he evidently does not mean to ask. Why, Ella, do you think?"

She answered carelessly.

"Some fad of his, or his mamma's, I suppose—some *mésalliance* in your family, perhaps?"

"*Mésalliance*? There never was any,

that I know of—why should you suggest such a thing?”

“Only because I could not think of anything else—and I have heard that Lady Brancepeth is very proud, and exclusive. She would not visit *here*, I can tell you, although her son and Sir Locksley are cousins. Who was your mother, Mary?”

“My mother?” I repeated, looking blankly at her impassive face. “I—I—I know nothing of my mother, except that she died when I was a little baby. You know I came to England very young. Grandpapa had never known my mother—and she had no relations in England, so I never heard her spoken of. Do you know anything of her, Gabrielle?”

“*I?* Bless the girl! I never even heard of *you*, until I met you at Mrs. Shelden’s!

No, Mary, it was a mere chance suggestion of mine. Play your cards well—use your power well—and you may laugh any ‘warning’ to scorn, that would keep your lover from you! Go to bed now, child. Your candle is burnt to the edge—you must go to bed by fire-light.”

“But, Ella! What *shall* I do with these unlucky papers? Shall I give them back to Gillespie without comment, and he may return them to the desk, as he found them; he is not likely to read over all his rubbish again for a day or two.”

Ella paused, and considered a moment.

“No, that would not do; better destroy them.”


“Oh, I dare not! if Captain Brancepeth misses them, and asks me if I have seen them. That would be bad enough,

he would see at once that I was guilty. But then he would hardly expect that I could volunteer any admission of having read them. But how could I confess to having destroyed them?"

"Will you entrust those pages to me, for to-night, and in the morning I shall have found out some way of escape for you."

I hesitated a little; but Gabrielle put an end to indecision by again snatching the papers, and leaving the room with them. So I was fain to resign myself, and fell asleep wondering whether she meant to burn them, or put them back into Captain Brancepeth's room.

I awoke late; Lizzie had left me sleeping, and was up and away. I dressed hastily, and had not finished my toilet when



the breakfast-bell rang. A moment afterwards Gabrielle came into my room, with Willie's MS. in her hand, which she laid on my mantel-piece.

"There, Mary," she said, "when Gillespie asks for his paper, make a sign to me, and come back here, and fetch it for him. Be sure that I am close beside you, when you give it him, and trust the rest to me."

And without waiting for a reply, she ran downstairs.

There was a larger party than usual assembled at breakfast, and they were all in such animated conversation that no one noticed my entrance, except the one whom, of all others, I wished at that moment to avoid.

Captain Brancepeth was looking towards the door when I came in, and rose to

lead me to the seat I usually occupied at his side of the table; but I passed him, without pretending to observe his gesture, and placed myself next to Miss Hosmer, and opposite to Gabrielle, who was speaking as I came in.

"That," she was saying, "supplies the only charm of antiquity, that was wanting in your beautiful place, Sir Locksley, a real Apparition! That is delightful!"

"But is it genuine?" asked Mrs. Twyning, "so far we have only the servants' word for it, and we all know how easily apparitions are invented in the servants' hall."

"Several of the servants declare that they have seen it," said Miss Hosmer. "My maid, Angela, says there is quite a commotion about it downstairs, it has been seen at three o'clock in the

morning gliding along the west corridor, and vanishing in the south gallery."

Sir Locksley turned to the butler, who stood behind his mother's chair.

"I say, Polson, what is all this about? What has been seen, and when—and where? Speak out, man."

"I haven't seen nothing myself, Sir Locksley," answered Polson, "nor I haven't heard nothing; but the maids do say as how a week ago, and again, last night, a figure, all in white, and with a blue light in its hand, was seen at three o'clock in the west corridor; and it glided across to the south gallery, and there it vanished. I know no more, Sir Locksley, if I were shot for it!"

"And pray," said General Hosmer, "what were the maids doing up at

three o'clock in the morning to see this Vision?"

Some of the gentlemen laughed at this inquiry, but Polson answered very demurely.

"It was the still-room maid, General, who was took bad with tooth-ache; and she was going to the housekeeper's room to look for something to do it good."

"I am sorry," began Sir Locksley, and then paused with so serious an aspect, that at once all eyes were turned on him, and he resumed, amid a general silence. "I am very sorry, ladies and gentlemen, that this should have occurred during your visit. I had hoped this season, at least, might have passed by without the annoyance of such a visitation; but since that may not be, I can assure you there is no cause for alarm. It is perfectly harmless, and has never been

seen beyond the west corridor and the south gallery, where none of you are likely to wander. Even you," he said to the servants, who were gazing at him open-mouthed and horror-struck, "even you, who might meet it on its beat, are quite safe, if you don't actually cross its path."

A tumultuous inquiry arose from all the party.

"What is it? Sir Locksley, is there really anything? You are humbugging us all. Good Lord! how grave he looks! E—e—e!"

(A thin shriek from the younger ladies, and a gasping effort from Lady Waldron to make herself heard, which was authoritatively put down by her step-son, who resumed his speech).

"I cannot tell you what It is. I have never seen It myself. I hope to God I never may. It is only seen once in

seven years. It was whispered about in my grandfather's time as the 'Bleeding Nun.'"

"Egad," said Finlayson, "if all reports were true that I have heard were afloat in your grandfather's time, a Nun, bleeding, or not bleeding, was about the last thing one would have expected to meet with in Forest Court, in spirit, or in flesh."

"The tradition," continued our host, without noticing the interruption, "was, that in former times, before Forest Court came into the possession of my family, a cruel wrong had been done to one of the daughters of its then owners, by forcing her against her will, to take the veil in a neighbouring convent, where she stabbed herself. And once in seven years, at this period of the year, she revisits her an-

cient home, in the form of a white figure."

Here Lady Waldron burst forth impetuously,

"Goodness gracious me! Why, Locksley, I have lived at Forest Court—mistress and maid—these forty years, and never before in my life did I hear one word of any Bleeding Nun, or any ghost of any kind!"

"I am aware of that, mother," answered Sir Locksley, composedly, "it was a point of honour with my father and my brother, to keep concealed from you what would have made you so nervous and unhappy. You should not have known it now, if the secret had not transpired through the servants."

"And for how long does this uncomfort-

able lady promenade the house?" inquired Gabrielle.

But before Sir Locksley could answer, the general attention was diverted to Charlie Stanton, who had been for some time struggling to suppress a laugh, until the struggle, combined with the simultaneous attempt to swallow some hot coffee, resulted in a convulsion which seemed to threaten instant suffocation.

Lady Waldron, however, ran to him, and began to thump him on the back with such motherly good-will, that he presently recovered sufficiently to rush out of the room, and we heard him shouting in the hall in perfect agonies of glee. Sir Locksley also left the room, followed by his principal cronies; and we then dispersed to our usual pursuits.

As I was about to quit the company, Gillespie stopped me.

"I say, Mary, a real ghost will take the shine out of my story, won't it? It's all a hoax of Sir Locksley and Charlie Stanton's—you'll see. Give me my MS., there's a dear—I am off to old Garnet's again."

"I will fetch it," I said, with a glance at Ella, who immediately addressed to Captain Brancepeth some critical remark about a sea-piece that hung on the wall, and contrived to draw Willie Gillespie into the conversation.

When I returned with the MS. she said—

"So you are turned author, Mr. Gillespie. I hope you will not limit your literary confidence to Miss St. Felix—that M.S. looks very tempting."

"Oh, don't ask to read that, Miss

Delmar, if you value your eyes," laughed Captain Brancepeth. "I do not wonder that Miss St. Felix looks pale this morning when she has been poring over that frightful scrawl."

"Are you sure it is all there?" inquired Ella, carelessly, "because, just before breakfast, I saw Moustache under the table on the landing, employed in tearing up some sheets of paper that looked very much like these?"

"The little devil!" cried Willie. "I hope I did not drop any last night—he'd soon make mince-meat of them. Where did you see him, Miss Delmar?"

"On the bed-room staircase—near his mistress' door."

Away darted the alarmed author, while Gabrielle quietly resumed her criticism on the picture.

Presently Willie returned, with a huge

heap of torn paper in his hands, which he tossed down on a side-table.

"It's your writing, Brancepeth—let's see if we can what it belongs to."

Captain Brancepeth went up to the table and began to examine the torn and gnawed fragments, while Ella laughed, and I stood trembling, hesitating whether to go or stay.

At last the sailor took up the heap, and threw it all into the fire.

"It is part of a letter I was writing to my mother," he said. "You must have dropped it out of my desk; when you went for the M.S., Willie, and that little beast must have found it."

"No doubt he thought it was intended for his special diversion," said Ella, "he had taken it into his basket.

Lady Waldron often gives him papers to tear up. She says it keeps him quiet."

"He'll tear up something of importance one day, if she doesn't mind," said Willie, "it's a dangerous trick to teach a little dog."

"Take care he doesn't tear up the answer to your first love-letter, Willie," laughed Captain Brancepeth, as Ella, with unusual familiarity, passed her arm round my waist and drew me away to our boudoir.

CHAPTER II.

GABRIELLE'S COUNSEL.

"Thou art noble, yet I see
Thy honourable metal may be wrought
From that it is disposed ; therefore 'tis meet
That noble minds keep ever with their like
For who so firm, that cannot be seduced ?

JULIUS CÆSAR.

WHEN we were alone.

"Now !" said Ella, triumphantly,
"have I not brought you well out of that
scrape? Don't you admire my tactics?"

"I don't know," I replied, doubt-
fully, "it was clever of you, certainly,
but——"

"But what, you little fool? You look as dejected as Moustache did, when I took the paper from him before he had torn it too small to make out what it was!"

"Oh, Ella! I feel so sly and mean! I wish I had given back that paper—and still more, that I had never read it."

"Wishing will not recall the past, my dear little Ingénue; it would have been as well if you never had read it, certainly, if you are going to look as conscious as you did this morning, whenever Captain Brancepeth looks towards you. If he were not as frank and unsuspecting as sailors mostly are—your guilty face would have spoiled all. Fortunately, now he supposes his letter is done with; there is not a chance that he will ever allude to the subject in your presence again."

“No. I am very glad of that.”

“Mary,” cried Ella, looking keenly at me, “tell me candidly—do you care to have this man for your lover? Your openly declared lover, I mean—for from his letter, it is evident that he is yours in heart.”

“I see no evidence of the kind; on the contrary, he says——”

“Here is what he says” said Ella, and calmly seating herself, she took a paper from her pocket, and unfolded it on the table before her.

“Yes, my dear, I took a copy of the gallant mariner’s composition before delivering it into the jaws of the little lion on the stair-case; and now we will hold council together over it.”

“But is it right—?”

“Might makes right—it is expedient;

and you have read it before too, Mademoiselle Scrupulous."

"But I did so involuntarily."

"And you already have it by heart; come now, let us talk it over."

"No, no, I can't!"

In fact, Jane, it seemed like treason in me to criticise any writing of Captain Brancepeth's in cold blood with Gabrielle. I don't feel it so with you, who have always shared every secret of this foolish heart of mine. And so I took the paper from her (you have the words copied verbatim,) and I burnt it when I had transcribed it for you.

"Well," she continued, "I do not wish to force your confidence Mary, nor is it necessary, with those tell-tale scarlet cheeks of yours. You would like to bring the sailor to your feet, and the rather, or you are no true woman, because, for

whatever reason, he seems inclined to retain his independence and resist your power, even while he admits it."

"He is perfectly welcome to his independence," I said with a saucy toss of my head, "only I *should* like to know what it is in me that he considers himself 'warned' against."

"Never mind that, prove the weakness of any 'warning' against your fascinations. Easy to talk—"

"And easy to do, if you would only lay aside that school-girl simplicity of yours, that makes it plain to any bystander that Captain Brancepeth has only to ask, and have!"

"Ella! how dare you? I hate you!"

She went on without heeding my remark.

"The prettiest woman on earth has no chance with a man, if she lets him fancy

that he can have her whenever he likes, and that no other man disputes his conquest. You will admit that *I* can, at any moment, gather almost all the men in a room round me, while *you* sit lonely—and yet you are far prettier than I am?”

I sulked and said nothing.

“My secret is merely, that the men know that I can choose, and rivalry is always a great spice to admiration. Men are vain; and to be distinguished by the preference of a woman who has many admirers, always gratifies them more than the worship of one who has no opportunity of selection.”

“That may, or may not be, Ella, it certainly does not apply to Captain Brancepeth, as far as you are concerned. He *never* joins the circle, which as you say, you gather round you sometimes.”

“Oh, Captain Brancepeth! Captain Brancepeth again! Well, now, shall I show you, that he is not so impassive as you think—even as regards me? Shall I bring him to my feet, Mary, and will you forgive me if I do?”

Indignant silence.

“Well—come, do not look so offended. I don’t want your ‘Sailor Poet,’ I want to teach you how to secure your half-won prize.”

“I begin to think I *should* like to secure it, if only to rebuke your arrogance in suggesting that I have no chance against you. I have a good mind to ‘set my cap’ at your special hero—Sir Lockley himself.”

“Bravo,” laughed Ella, “so I have stirred up the dormant spirit of coquetry at last! It is very becoming to you, Mary.

It suits your style of piquante *espiègle* beauty far better than that demure, puritanical sobriety, that you have picked up at the Sheldens. Do exercise your attractions for others besides that eternal Captain, and leave off your bib and tucker style of dress—and your friend will leave off reminding his mamma of her ‘warnings’.”

“Oh, as for my style of dress, if you think I would go almost *undressed*, as you do—”

But Ella’s reply was interrupted by the entrance of a servant with a summons for me to the library, where I found Selina Shelden and Bertha, who had driven over in the Stanton’s little pony-chaise. Bertha looked as usual very calm and fair, but a little paler than she used to look, and, though I cannot tell you

why, the effect her appearance in this house produced on me, was much like that which we sometimes feel, when we draw back the curtains from a brilliantly lighted saloon, and look out and up, to the pure, cold stars. Lady Waldron was present with some others of her guests, so that we had no private conversation, until Miss Shelden rose to take leave. Then her Ladyship broke forth into remonstrance.

“It is quite unkind in you, Selina; if you will not stay with me yourself, you might leave your cousin for a few days. Or, if you will let her come when Lizzie Beauchamp goes away; Mary will be dull without her companion. Mary, my dear, take her into your own room, and try what your persuasion can accomplish.”


Selina followed me into my own room,

whence Gabrielle had disappeared; but she gave me no time to try my arts of persuasion. She began at once.

“ My dear Miss St. Felix, I *do* hope you are prepared to leave Forest Court at *least* as soon as Lizzie will. Indeed, Mr. Beauchamp has commissioned me to say, that if you will go with her, he will borrow the Stanton’s close carriage for you both, instead of coming for her in the pony-chaise as he had intended.”

“ Much obliged to Mr. Beauchamp, but I am very happy here, and Lady Waldron is not anxious to get rid of me.”

“ But we are anxious to have you back. Excuse me, dear Miss St. Felix, I know I have no authority over you; but still, you must allow me *some* privilege, as your guardians have placed you in my charge. Your visit has been *quite* long



enough, and there are many reasons why you should end it."

"It will be time enough to return to Lawn Cottage when Gabrielle does. We were invited together."

Miss Shelden hesitated a little.

"You had better not regulate your movements by Miss Delmar's, Miss St. Felix. I have reason to believe, though I do not wish it talked of at present, that Miss Delmar will not continue to live at Lawn Cottage; perhaps she will not even return there, for more than a day or two. I believe she has made arrangements elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? she has never said a word to me on the subject!" cried I, greatly surprised.

But Miss Shelden evaded any further allusion to Gabrielle, or her intentions, and

continued to press me to fix an early day for my return to her. She was unsuccessful. Ashfield seemed to me very dull and lonely, compared with the variety and movement of Forest Court; and, besides, I wanted to make out that "warning" of Captain Brancepeth's first. So I resisted even the mute appeal in Bertha's eyes; and, at last, when Selina was so ill-advised as to quote Mr. Prior's opinion, that Sir Locksley's house was not the best place for a young lady to visit too long, I grew pert and insolent, until Bertha dropped her eyes silently, and Selina began to speak warmly—then checked herself suddenly, with that plaintive little sigh of hers; and kissing me kindly, withdrew from the room—and the house.

All the rest of the morning and afternoon I was irritable and peevish; but no

one was near to suffer from my ill-temper; for Lizzie had gone with the Hosmers to Hartingford, and would not be back until the evening; and Ella was out with the harriers. I saw no pleasure in witnessing the tortures of a poor little defenceless animal. I never joined in any of the sports; I would almost as soon go for amusement to a slaughter-house. So I took a brisk walk in the gardens, with little Miss Twyning prattling at my side; and all the time she chattered, I was musing on Ella's advice, and sometimes reproaching myself for my unkindness to Selina, who meant well, I had no doubt. So that my conversation with Dolly Twyning alternated with my reflections in this way.—

“ Yes, Miss Delmar is a splendid horse-woman, I believe. Why does she say that

he sees that he has only to ask, and have? Yes—dogs—but I am afraid of horses. I can't ride. He thinks me a mere baby, perhaps his mother has 'warned' him against an 'unformed' chit, who might fall in love with the first man who— Oh, no, Dolly! it's all nonsense—I do not believe in ghosts. Well, I *should* like to show him that I am no child, but a woman, who can 'choose' among as many admirers as Ella, if I think it worth the trouble. There's the lunch bell—let us go in, Dolly."

CHAPTER III.

HOW IT IS FOLLOWED.

"When, midst the gay, I meet
That blessed smile of thine,
Though still on me it turns most sweet,
I scarce can call it mine."

MOORE.

GABRIELLE came into my room a little before dinner.

"I have come," she said, "to offer my services to help arm you for conquest. Since Miss Beauchamp is absent, I dressed myself earlier than usual on purpose."

"I think you must have been arming yourself for conquest," said I, looking at her admiringly, "for I never saw you look so well."

And she did look magnificent. The piles and piles of her hair seemed to form a coronal, almost too weighty for her small head, which bore itself so proudly on the haughty, swan-like neck. Her exquisite form was displayed to the utmost advantage by a rich dress of ruby velvet, rather matronly for so young a woman, but one that suited her admirably; and, as usual, her throat, and arms glittered with costly jewels. Her cheeks were flushed with roses that would not be *refreshed* by dews—and her eyes flashed beneath their black, pencilled brows, with a subdued excitement which I had noticed in her manner lately, and which had quite

replaced the sleepy languor that characterized it on her first arrival at Ashfield.

“Never mind my looks,” she answered, “it is yours that are in question now. What dress will you wear?”

“I have not so much choice; there is the white muslin I wore yesterday.”

“Oh, that will not do—there is a large party to dinner to-night; strangers whom Sir Locksley invited at the meet this morning; and there are some new people from town, come to stay. It is a full dress reception to-night; you must wear your pink silk, and your white jessamine wreath.”

“Well—I must sew a lace chemisette in front; the one I wore in it is taken out, and that dress is cut fearfully low.”

“There is no time for that—I can

lend you a scarf; come, make haste. The Hosmer girls were going down stairs when I came in."

She soon completed my toilet, and then stood back and looked at me with satisfaction.

"You are certainly a pretty girl, Mary, and you ought to be able to keep the gallant captain to his moorings—is not that a nautical phrase?—though he does seem so sure that he can drift away *when* he pleases."

"But the scarf, Ella? This dress is too low."

"Not a bit for the fashion; only little 'unformed' school girls muffle themselves up to the chin, as you do. Don't be a prude. I think you ought to have a touch of this," (touching her own cheek), "if only to keep the colour steady, which goes

and comes so, in your tell-tale face."

"I'm not going to have any such filth smeared on me, I can tell you—like old Mrs. Sheldon!"

"Nor do you need it. It is only a sallow brunette like me, who requires artificial colouring; but no scarf shall you have—so come along quick."

There were, as she said, a great many new arrivals at the dinner-table that day; and a larger proportion than usual of them were men. All eyes turned on Ella and me as we came in, and I felt dreadfully conscious of my paucity of attire, and would have slunk to Miss Hosmer's side, who sat near her stately sister, both arrayed in robes more rigidly rising to their throats than ever—veiling the charms they did not possess.

But alas! the General's daughter cast a

side-long, but most significant glance at my uncovered shoulders, and then, pinching her lips tight together, turned her back on me, as an object too unpleasant to dwell upon. So I turned away in high resentment, and took refuge in a little knot of ladies—married ladies they were, too, who were more *décolletées* than myself; and tried to persuade myself that I had made a happy choice of a livelier set of people than those starched Hosmers and Twynings were.

But Captain Brancepeth did not approach me, nor address me. Once only I ventured to look towards him, and I saw him looking fixedly—not at me, but at Ella. Well, he should see that I was not dependent on his notice for my pleasure, anyhow. So I chatted, and laughed, and coquetted, the best I knew, with the young officer

who took me into dinner; and I suppose I acquitted myself well, for when the ladies retired to the drawing-room, Ella came up to me, and drew me away to a snug *causeuse* in a corner.

“ You have behaved admirably,” she whispered, “ the Captain has been casting furious looks at your Cavalier all dinner time. Don’t mind, even if he sulks a little—it is only jealousy; and jealousy is just the spur that these secure lovers want to make them prize what they have thought so lightly of, because they were sure of it. Keep close to me, Mary; no one will venture to follow you, if you take refuge among those starched wall-flowers yonder.”

Close to her I kept accordingly, and we were soon surrounded by a circle of gay young men—some of whom were rather more gay than—well, than they had

been when we left the dining-room; and once, my heart failed me, they pressed so close, and stared so hard, and laughed so loud.

I looked across the room, almost mechanically, to where Captain Brancepeth was standing. He met my eyes, and as if in answer to some involuntary appeal in them, he took one step forward—then checked himself, and turning away, took a seat beside Miss Hosmer, and began an animated conversation with her. Gabrielle had been watching me, and now darted a quick glance at me, lifting her eyebrows slightly. I bit my lips with anger and mortification, and then, turning to the group around me, I gave myself up to a reckless gaiety which, apparently, was much approved of, since the circle widened round me, and many of the gentlemen even

forsook their allegiance to Gabrielle to join it.

Among these defaulters was Sir Locksley himself, who scarcely ever had spoken to me; but now he sat down beside me, and stared at me from head to foot, in that way he has, which I have always thought so *hateful*. I think a girl must be either very innocent, or very bold, who can support such a look, unmoved. Other men can look fixedly at you—Captain Brancepeth has a way of looking full into your eyes, as if he could read your very soul through them; but that is a very different look from Sir Locksley's. The one glance—Godiva herself might have met it unshrinkingly, reading in it only the pure recognition of a noble deed; the other—Heaven guarded her from that, by striking with blindness, a vile Peeping Tom!

Ella meets that look of Sir Locksley's, as if it were something that was her due, and which she would feel slighted to miss. As for me, I shrank, and cowered beneath it, and felt humiliated, and abashed. Once—it was the only time that Bertha ever spent an evening here, when I first came—I saw Sir Locksley fix this stare on her. She was kneeling, girl-like, at Lady Waldron's feet, caressing little Moustache who lay in his mistress's lap; and Sir Locksley stood over her, and glared greedily down on her. Suddenly she looked up, full into his face, with such a holy light of purity in her calm blue eyes—such a virgin innocence, and unconsciousness of wrong, that the satyr in him was rebuked, and he slunk away.

As for me, once more I glanced towards the “Sailor Poet” as I call him now,

and once more he was looking towards me, though not at me, and with such a heavy frown on his brow, as I should never have thought it could wear. Jealous! thought I, with a thrill of gratified vanity. "So, Ella's prediction is coming true at last!"

Here Sir Locksley addressed me.

"Wouldn't you like a waltz? I know how deuced fond you are of dancing. I'll order dance music for you if you'll waltz with me one turn. You never have, you know."

There was a murmur of satisfaction among the young people at this suggestion, which I welcomed gladly, for there had never been dancing yet but Captain Brancepeth had been my partner for two dances at least. The music soon struck up, the dancers grouped, Sir Locksley's arm was

round my waist, my hand tight clasped in his, and, my last glance towards Captain Brancepeth, beheld him quietly seated at the whist table, with his back to me, and old Mr. Westley for his partner.


Dance followed dance; the mirth grew fast and furious. Whist was over. The old people went off to bed. Sir Locksley paused an instant near his step-mother's sofa.

"Where is Brancepeth?" he said.

To which Lady Waldron quietly replied,


"Oh, he went away when the rubber was done; he has letters to write, for the foreign post, to-morrow."

Letters! thought I, aye, to his dear mamma, I suppose, to tell her how well he keeps the memory of her "warning,"



whatever it may be. And in very bitterness of soul, I gave myself up to the excitement of the hour. I laughed, and flirted, and was whirled about in familiar arms, and flattered by familiar lips, and felt myself despised and despicable. It was over. I shook myself free from Ella, who would have followed me into my room with her odious, half sneering congratulations. I tore off my untucked dress, without daring to look at myself in the glass, and I sobbed myself to sleep.

I awoke myself, a little later, with what must have been a smothered cry, and looked round me frightened, and bewildered. There was a light in the room, and Lizzie stood by my bedside, in her night-dress, and her black elf-locks streaming on her shoulders.



“What is it Liz?” I asked, wildly, “what has happened?”

“Nothing dear,” she replied, soothingly. “You had nightmare, I suppose, and screamed, and woke me up. See, your head has fallen sideways from the pillow ; that brought it on, no doubt. There, go to sleep again.”

She arranged me comfortably on my pillows, and as she stooped over me, to kiss me, I saw the tears glittering in her bright, kind eyes.

“Poor dear!” she murmured softly. “You were calling for your dead mother!”

CHAPTER IV.


OLD NEWSPAPERS.

“ Alack ! for lesser knowledge ! how accurst
In being so blest ! ”

A WINTER'S TALE.

MY dead mother ! my dead mother !
whom I never may call
for again ! Oh, Janey, I am so un-
happy ! Comfort me—comfort me, as
you used to do when—— But first, I
must tell you all, from the beginning. I
did not appear in the breakfast-room, in
the morning ; I had a headache, and Liz

brought me my tea up to my bedside. I got better, and would not allow her to stay with me, as she wished to do. I got up, dressed, and then sat down and wrote to you the full confession of my folly and penitence. You might say, though I know you will not, penitence for folly that did not succeed; that may be, I am not sure; but at least I am sure of one thing—that I am glad it did not succeed; that my failure showed me, as nothing else would, the unworthiness of such attempts at conquest. Am I proud of the admiration I won last night? No, I am humiliated and degraded by it! The insolent familiarity of those bold men; the more insolent patronage of those bolder women, who consort with them. Hitherto I had known nothing of it. Their circle, with Gabrielle for its queen, had seemed




to revolve in quite a separate sphere from mine; and some secret, mysterious influence had kept me apart from it, and retained me, either by the side of motherly Lady Waldron, or the demure Hosmers; or amid the boisterous, but very innocent gaiety of the Ashfield set.

And now! But the foolish dream is over. I have broken through the momentary fascination, and it will never have power on me any more. Captain Brancepeth, no doubt, saw through it all, and despises me—as well he may. At least, I am glad that I cannot despise *him*, as I am sure I should have done after all, if he had been so easily duped by the vulgar arts of a coarse coquetry. Yes, vulgar and coarse *all* arts must be, that appeal to the lowest instincts of the lowest natures. I have been a fool, a contemp-


tible idiot; but I am in my right mind now, (clothed, too, which I scarcely was last night) and—I will go back to Lawn Cottage with Liz on Saturday week.

Having arrived at this determination I felt more refreshed, and rehabilitated a little in my own eyes; and casting about for some employment which would last me till dinner-time, I descried a cloak, which Liz had borrowed from one of the ladies, to take the pattern of; and I thought it would be a good deed to take it for her, as I am more skilful in cutting out than she is. But I had no paper. On reflection, it struck me that I had seen a great pile of old newspapers in the box of miscellanies that Lady Waldron had placed at our disposal in the arched chamber at the end of the old gal-



lery; and thither I repaired to seek for them.


Now I must try to describe this chamber. As I have told you, the rooms we three girls occupy, are a few steps lower than the grand staircase, which is circular, and the principal bedrooms are arranged round one side of it. On the opposite side, are the drawing-room, and library. Our wing is shut off by an arched door, and a corresponding door on the opposite end of the staircase communicates with three rooms, which are devoted to Sir Locksley's use, as bedroom, dressing, and smoking rooms. These were thrown open on the night of the great ball, and, with the other wing of the house, lighted and decorated, assisted greatly, to give the effect of space and splendour which I missed so much on my second visit. These rooms are spacious,



and in the time of the first Lady Waldron were used as state reception rooms. They are *en suite*, and open upon a long and wide gallery, lighted from above, and leading to a very large, arched room, which was built for a ball room, and which was used as such on the Festival night; but at present it is filled with all sorts of things—some mere lumber, and some ornaments, or household decorations of various kinds, that are to be put back into the new gallery, which is to replace the old one that will be pulled down in the spring


Of course, in the original plan of the house, the readiest way to the gallery, or ball-room, was through the drawing-room suite of rooms; but since Sir Locksley had appropriated these, (as, indeed, the former baronet had likewise done), they are

reached from the first floor, only by descending the main staircase, and crossing the hall, to another flight of steps, which leads to the end of the gallery opposite the ball-room, and passes by the outer doors of Sir Locksley's apartments. From my room there was another way, down the back staircase, past the housekeeper's room, and along a corridor which ran at the back of the hall, and from which opened the servants' dormitories. And this was the road which Liz and I usually chose for our little excursions, as being the least frequented by other visitors. And this was the way I chose to take this morning, not caring to meet any of my partners of last night's orgies. There was no fear of meeting them in the gallery, for the pistol-shooting there had been discontinued



at Lady Waldron's desire, because she had occasion to visit the arched chamber more frequently in quest of her nick-nacks, that had been removed there. So Sir Locksley's targets were taken away, and set up in some of the out-buildings. I met no one, except a maid-servant or two, whom I passed in the corridor, (the geese will not stir there alone, in the dusk, for fear of the Bleeding Nun!) nor was there any one in the gallery. I looked about in the arched room for the box containing the newspapers, but could not see it.

At last I descried it, just outside, and behind the door, where it had been carried I suppose by mistake, and so abandoned there. I knelt down beside it, at the feet of a mailed warrior, or, at least, the iron shell of one, that stood on a pedestal



against the wall, and began to rummage for my papers. I soon found them, such a heap! and old—Oh, years on years old! yellow, and moth-eaten, and mouldered. I turned them over, and bent my eyes on their dim columns, with a kind of languid curiosity as to what sort of news had interest for people who lived so long ago. Why, I must have been a baby, if even I was born, for there were news, hasty news, of battles in which my father might have fought—though I do not think he did; and brilliant naval engagements, which used to excite my old grand-dad so, when I was a little mite, ten years ago. And there were lists of dead and wounded. Oh! what eager, anxious, sorrowful eyes, must often have searched these!

Suddenly, in another part of the paper,

my wandering glance was arrested by my own—by my father's name. Oh, Janey! how can I tell you, even you! It was not a long paragraph; it was chiefly an allusion to some paragraph in a former paper. I could not, if I would, transcribe it; but the sense, even in that moment of horror, was but too plain to me. It announced the divorce of Captain Edward St. Felix of the — Rifles (my father's regiment) from his wife, who, the paper reminded its readers, had eloped from him, a year after marriage, with the Honourable Somebody, second son of the Earl of Desborough, and Colonel of the — Brigade, stationed at Corfu. (These names I noted down, I scarcely glanced at the rest.)

Was this, then, the gentle mother I had so often pined for? The mother, who

must have deserted me in my infancy! No wonder I had never heard her spoken of. Did Ella know of it, when she asked me who my mother was? Did Liz know it? Perhaps everybody knew it; and when I flirted, and danced, and made such a hateful fool of myself last night, they watched me with pitying contempt, and said among themselves,


“Like mother—like daughter!”

These thoughts, and thousands as sad and bitter, crowded on my mind, as I flung from me the record of my family disgrace, and leaning my head on the open chest, I wept bitterly.

I might have indulged my grief much longer, but I was startled from it by hearing a man's step entering the arched room from the door on the farther side from where I sat. It traversed the room rapidly,

and then paused close to the door behind which I was ensconced. I shrank back, and cowered down between the lifted lid of the huge chest, and the figure of the armed knight on his pedestal, not at all inclined to be surprised by Sir Locksley, or any of his guests, before I could so much as wipe away my tears. Whoever it was, there was no danger of his coming out on me just then, for he had stopped short, and seemed, by the noise he made, to be dragging about some of the rubbish near him.

The next moment another step, which I knew from the jingle of spurs, strode into the room, by the same door which had admitted the first visitor; and a voice — Sir Locksley's voice—harsh, and high-pitched as usual, cried,



“Hallo, Brancepeth! who would have thought of finding you groping in this old rat-hole, among my great grandmother’s farthingales? Are you going to get up a masquerade, or charades, or what?”

“No, indeed,” answered the sailor, with his pleasant laugh, “her ladyship sent me here for a pile of old newspapers that she had forgotten in one of these chests, and which she wants to refer to for some point in dispute, between her and General Hosmer.”

“You need not hunt for them in that black box, there are only my father’s things in that. I have come for an old curb bit of his invention, that Rouston wants to—ah! here is my treasure-trove! but it is in pieces. I wonder—is it all here?”

And Sir Locksley drew forward a chair to a table near him, and seemed to employ himself in examining the curb.

"Now for flight!" thought I, and I tried to rise; but my constrained position had brought on such a fearful fit of cramp, that I could hardly help shrieking for pain, and I sat writhing silently, squeezed flat behind the door, and trying not to groan.

"Confound it!" resumed Sir Locksley, "some links, or hooks are lost; they were all right when I saw it last, but Lady Waldron lets the girls run wild in this room, and they turn everything topsyturvy. Gad! I wish I were well rid of the whole lot of tabbies, young and old, and could enjoy my batchelor home in my own way again!"

“Isn’t it rather late for such lawless regrets?” asked his companion. “I thought the batchelor home was to be given up soon?”


“I hope to have a free fling or two first. I have my choice to fix yet.”

“People fancy, and say, that your choice has been fixed, this long time.”

“Oh, they’ll say that every day of a fresh face, but did you believe such rubbish, Brancepeth, that you look so grave?”

No answer.

“Do you know who the girl is, whom these gossiping old cats fancy I think of marrying? An illegitimate daughter of an Irish banker, and money-lender—a garrison hack, besides!”



"My good fellow," interposed the Captain, rather sternly, "whatever may be the young lady's connections, do not forget that she is your mother's guest."

"With all my heart. But surely, Brancepeth, you could not think I would choose such a girl as that for my wife?"

"You have paid her sufficient attention to warrant her, and others, in believing so."

"I have paid her the attention which is her due, as the finest woman, by far, of the whole party; and so much, and no more, I shall continue to pay her."

"Do you seriously affirm that you have no intention to marry this lady?"

"D—d if I have, or ever had!"



A pause.

Then Captain Brancepeth said, very slowly and significantly.

“In that case, Waldron, the sooner you break up the party, and return to your batchelor house-keeping, the better for everybody.”

The dialogue seemed growing confidential. I made another effort to rise and steal away. The demon cramp transferred his gripe from my left side, and ankle, to my right shoulder and leg, with a twist and a cruel wrench that extorted a faint moan. But Sir Locksley's heavy tread drowned it, as he strode up and down the room.

At last.

“Come, old fellow, please to explain that hint of yours.”

“See here, Waldron; it is, I know,

your wish and intention to take the rank in the county to which your name and fortune entitle you. Your ambition is, to be of some social and political importance here, and to repair the injury done to your estate and position by the former Baronet's imprudence, or carelessness?"

"Exactly ; and these aims would be greatly advanced, would they not, by such a marriage as my friends do me the honour to contemplate for me?"


Captain Brancepeth continued,

"You have hitherto exerted yourself to secure the first step to your success, by gaining popularity among your neighbours. It was for this end that you gave such brilliant entertainments on first coming into the property ; it was for this end that you persuade your step-mother to


receive as her guests, and treat with lavish hospitality, the most influential members of the county circles here, with their wives and daughters?"

"Just so. I only wish they were not such a cursed pack of ignorant prudes and twaddles. But what are you driving at, Brancepeth? Speak out man, in the devil's name."

"I mean to do so. These people, whose good-will you are so interested in gaining, are not perhaps very keen-sighted, or worldly wise; but neither are they wholly blind or ignorant. They know that such things *have* been, as that a man should so far forget what was due to his own self-respect, and to the roof that covers his father's widow, as to make his pretended hospitality to women of character, and position, a screen for a



profligate intrigue, carried on beneath their very eyes. Stop, no rage, Waldron. I should be sorry to accuse you ; but still more, any lady in this house, of complicity in such infamy ; it is enough to justify my warning, to point out to you that such a suspicion *may* arise ; and if it does, whether just or unjust, farewell to all your chances of popularity among your neighbours, who will resent, to your dying day, the insult you have offered to them and theirs."



CHAPTER V.

“ DECIDEDLY NOT.”

“ Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss
Though winning near the goal.”

KEATS.

SO long a silence followed Captain Brancepeth's very uncomfortable remarks, that I was beginning to think that he, or his companion, must have left the room; when Sir Locksley suddenly resumed the conversation, with a short laugh, that was too evidently forced, to impose even on me.

"Well," he said, "if our prudes and dowagers are so evil-minded as you seem to hint, a man must pick his steps with some prudence, to keep in their good graces—eh, Brancepeth? But you would hardly advise me to install this daughter of Erin as lady of Forest Court, would you?"

"I advise nothing. You would not take my advice if I did."

"So kind of you to press a wife on me, whom you would never dream of for yourself! Don't I know how you hold to the tradition, 'All the men brave, and all the women virtuous,' and so forth? Don't I remember how your mother warned you once about those pretty Miss Gresfords, when we were visiting together at Alney Wych—that they were the daughters of a divorcée; and you said,

no woman who was not of unblemished descent, as well as reputation, should ever be wife of yours."

(Oh, my heart! was *this* the warning he remembered as regarded me?)


He answered impatiently.

"You speak wide of the mark, Waldron, and you know it. Let us end this talk. I have said all I mean to say on this subject."

"Stop one minute," and I could not help fancying that there was a suppressed malignity in the Baronet's accent. "I have one word to say on the subject, and you cannot refuse to hear me, since you began the conversation."

"All right, I hear you."

"What if I do, as the idiots here have suggested that I intended doing, and choose a bride from among the



fair bevy my step-mother has surrounded herself with, will you bar my choice, or not?"


"*I?*" (in a tone of astonishment.)
"What can *I* have to say in the matter, I should like to know?"

"Why, it would not be fair to cross a friend, a guest too, in *his* little chase, especially when one's affections, (as the ladies say) were still under due control."

"I do not understand you," (very coldly).

"I will be very plain. There is a little lady, a friend of our Irish belle's, whom I should not mind trying my fortune with, if — if it would not involve rivalry with you?"

Dead silence, or what seemed so to me, for my heart beat so loud



in my ears, that, for a moment, all other sounds were inaudible. Then Captain Brancepeth said quite carelessly :

“Would *that* be such a brilliant marriage for you?”

“That is my affair; only tell me, am I free to try my chance.”

“Free? Certainly; how can I hinder you?”

“By saying, honestly, that you have views of your own in that direction, honourable views, of course, I mean. I am not one of Collingwood’s Saints and Methodists, and so am not given to suspect my friends of—what was the polite expression?—oh, ay, ‘profligate intrigue.’”

“And by Heaven!” said Captain Brancepeth, in a tone of such suppressed passion

that it made me tremble, "I think the man does not live, who would dare, in my presence, so much as to name that young girl in the same breath with the word 'dishonour!'"

"I am not the man, at all events," laughed Sir Locksley, (oh! how I *loathed* him,) "there is no satisfaction to be got out of fellows like you, who are no duellists; that is what it is to be 'a distinguished officer.' You can repose on your laurels, and decline the single combat, which is forced on a poor devil like me, who has been chained to garrison duty all his days. Well, just one word, old fellow; do you mean to propose for this young lady yourself, or not?"

"Most decidedly not."

"Then I may try my luck?"

But just then his companion pulled a large drawer from an old bureau near him, with such violence, that it fell out, and all its multitudinous contents rolled out upon the floor, with such a noise and rattle, that I took advantage of it to spring up, and speed away from my hiding-place, as swiftly, and lightly as my cramp would allow. Oh! that the cramp had seized my ears, instead of my limbs, and my eyes as well, before I had read that paragraph, or overheard those words! Now, blind and deaf to all else, I fled along the gallery, and so rushed right into the arms of Charlie Stanton, who was coming into it, through Sir Locksley's smoking-room. The sudden collision brought me to myself, like the shock of a shower-bath.

"Oh, Charlie—don't stop me! don't hold me—how rude you are!"

"Rude, indeed!" cried Liz's pet cub, "I like that! What are you about here, upsetting a fellow in this fashion? Pay forfeit, Madam, give me a kiss, or you shall not go!"

"How dare you be so impertinent? Let me go, or I'll tell Lady Waldron of you."

(Just then, my ears became aware of a movement in the room at the other end of the gallery. Those men were coming out of it.)

"One kiss, Mollymachree, and off you go! You have owed me one, you little cheat, ever since you escaped from me on Christmas Eve, when I caught you under the mistletoe."

(Steps coming nearer.)

"Let me go, Charlie," (wildly) "and I won't do it again."

“Do it once, my dear, and you may do it again as often as you like.”

(Captain Brancepeth whistles “Rule Britannia.”)

I struggle frantically.

“Let me go, you hurt me, let me go.”

“If I let you go, will you give me one tiny kiss? Honour bright, you know?”

(He is coming, he is pushing against the door, which is barred by the chest I had been seated behind.)

“Yes—yes! I will give you one—let me go!”

My too credulous captor released me, and I flew past him like the wind; but, with a bound, he was upon me; and finding escape impossible, I uttered a piercing shriek. Up came a deliverer.

"Charlie, what are you teasing that child for? Let her go, instantly!"

"Oh, Captain Brancepeth, take him away; let me go—let me go!"

Says Charlie,

"Don't you meddle, Brancepeth. She promised me a kiss, before you came up, and a promise is a promise; 'honour bright,' she said too. The little wild cat! She has clawed off one half of my best whisker."

Before this speech was finished, Captain Brancepeth was holding me in one hand, while with the other he warded off my assailant. He now looked down into my face, full into my very eyes.

"Did you promise?" he asked.

What was I to do? If I confessed, what would he think of me! If I denied, he would sooner believe me than Charlie,

surely. His glance seemed to hold my soul with a firmer grasp than that in which his hand held me. I wavered—faltered.

“I *did* promise him, but——”

Eye and hand still held mine, while you could count five, and a strange look flashed into his face. Was it scorn? was it—but how could it be—exultation? Then he dropped my hand, and passed on.

That two-legged bear of a Charlie instantly leaped on me, and seized me in his hateful gripe, and I shrieked louder than ever.


Back came the mariner.

“Charlie, don’t be a brute! let the girl go, or——”

“I won’t, until——”

There came a thud. I was caught

from the relaxing arms that clasped me, and down rolled Charlie, and lay, like a dead porpoise at my feet. He was up again almost instantly, and flew with fury upon his antagonist, while I took to my heels and rushed along the gallery, down the staircase, along the corridor, screaming the whole time at a pitch, and with a persistence, of which I could not have supposed even feminine lungs to be capable. I was conscious, as I fled, of other feet hurrying to the scene of action. Sir Locksley came down the main staircase, and made a snatch at me as I passed; but I eluded him, and never stopped till I reached my own room, when I threw myself into a chair, and, half from excitement, half from real feeling of the ridiculous, burst into a fit of laughter.



"Are you gone out of your senses, Mary?" asked a cold voice near me, and I then perceived Ella standing near the window.

"Captain Brancepeth," I gasped out, incoherently, "fighting—Charlie—Sir Locksley——"

At that word Gabrielle disappeared.

By the time I had composed myself, and regained the manners of a civilized creature, she returned.

"Well?" I said.

She replied quietly,

"How fond men are of fighting. One would have thought the late war would have given most of them enough of it, but they will play at fighting, rather than not fight at all."

"Who fight now?"

"No one now. There was a regular

round between Captain Brancepeth, and that cub Charlie Stanton; and the other men were looking on. But they are all friends now. I fancy Charlie has a white feather, or so, in his gay plumage, whatever Miss Beauchamp may think."


And so saying, she walked away to her own room, and left me to my own devices.

CHAPTER VI.

FAITHLESS WILLIE.

“Oh, maid, relenting and cold as thou art,
My bosom is proud as thine own.”

THIS little episode of Charlie's had one beneficial effect on me—it diverted my thoughts in some degree from the appalling discovery I had made of my domestic misfortune; and the shock—the first shock having passed off, I was able to reflect on it—with deep sorrow indeed, but with more composure. I wondered if anyone knew of it beside myself. It was a long time ago—seven-



teen years—and in the interest of important national events that happened at the same time, it was not likely to attract much attention.

It happened so far off too! Neither Mr. O'Brien, nor any of my schoolfellows knew of it, I am certain. Nor did the Sheldens. No, I believe no one knows of it, unless it is Ella; and the questions she asked me about my family might, after all, have been dictated by a mere aimless curiosity.

But Captain Brancepeth! I cannot free myself from a suspicion that he knows it, that he has known it all along, and that it was this that he alluded to when he wrote those words which seemed to point to a barrier, an impassible barrier, against any feeling on his part, beyond simple admiration for me.

But how could he have learnt it? Possibly in the very same way in which I had learnt it myself. That chest was free to him as to us girls. He might have read those dreadful newspapers before I did. Oh, why did he not destroy them? "All the men brave, all the women virtuous." And on my forehead, he sees, ever impressed, the brand of a mother's shame! How it must have flamed forth last night! But that thought roused the spirit of self-assertion in me, and the courage, in which I have never been deficient, came also to my aid, as I inly resolved, that neither Captain Brancepeth, nor anyone else, should ever have cause to pity me for an inherited taint, of which I knew myself to be pure.

Henceforth, alas! farewell to the inno-

cent girlish lightness, which knows no fear, as it dreams of no evil. I must walk circumspectly now, as they walk whose steps are watched with suspicion and mistrust; but I will respect myself so much, as to give no one any reason to despise me.

I was not in the least apprehensive that Sir Locksley would carry out his threat of transferring his attentions from Gabrielle to me; it would be easy to evade that; but my instinct told me that he really had no intention of the kind, and that he had said it, either to annoy, or to blind, his friend. It scarcely dwelt a moment in my recollection.

The dinner-party that evening was smaller than it had been at any time since I came to Forest Court. The Hosmers, father, and daughters, were gone. So

were the officers, and two or three of the ladies, with their husbands or brothers, who had formed Ella's "set." Some strangers, quiet "county" people, had arrived in their place. Willy Gillespie had come back, and Charlie Stanton (with a shade over one eye) was in the drawing-room when I went downstairs; but no Captain Brancepeth appeared, and I dared not make inquiries about him.

Sir Locksley devoted himself the whole of dinner-time, to an old white-haired lady, the wife of a Deputy-Lieutenant of the county, whom he took in to dinner, and to whose husband Gabrielle was as attentive as if she and Sir Locksley had, by previous agreement, divided the couple between them.

Altogether, the whole party was as de-



murely quiet, in dress, manner, and deportment, as if Selina Shelden had had the arrangement of it.

In the evening, Willie came and sat by my side.

"I say, Mary!" he whispered, "here's a conversion somewhere. Has Mr. Prior been leaving tracts? There'll be no dancing to-night, no 'cakes and ale' for evermore. What does it all mean? and how did Charlie get that black eye?"

"I'll tell you that, myself," said the gentleman referred to, who overheard the query. "Miss St. Felix and I were having a quiet game at romps in the gallery, and before I could defend myself, Brancepeth came up, and knocked me down."

I blazed up instantly.

"How dare you say such a thing,

Charlie? You were very insolent, and Captain Brancepeth interfered at my request ; and you *did* defend yourself, like a wolf, as you are!"

"I will not contradict a lady," laughed Charlie, with his usual good-humoured carelessness. "I suppose I was wrong ; but, Mary, have you the heart to reproach me, when you see how I have suffered?"

"Did you fight?" asked Gillespie.

"Just a friendly round or two, for love, you know. But I am no match for Brancepeth in point of skill ; and I confess, I was too rough to little Mary here. So we shook hands, and parted friends. For once, Sir Locksley, who generally loves a row, seemed very anxious to make peace, and I'm the quietest fellow in the world, when I'm not very much aggravated."

Said Gillespie,

"I suppose Brancepeth was punished a little, too, since he has not appeared at dinner?"

"Oh, no, he is off to ——shire; he started by the afternoon coach for town, from Eltham."

"And bid nobody good-bye?" I said, with an assumed indifference, "that was civil of him, certainly. And *I* am going away in a few days, and never coming back."

"Ah!" said Charlie, "you are coming back to Ashfield. We shall all be so glad to have you with us again. Somehow, we are more at our ease there, and you don't look much the better for your visit, Mary; you are very pale this evening. Were you really frightened when you squealed so? I am very sorry if I vexed you, I am, indeed."

"Well, I forgive you, but no more attempts at romping, recollect. I am not a child, and will not be treated as one."

"We are all so very dignified to-night," laughed Lizzie, who now joined us. "There seems quite a re-action this evening."

"I say, Gillespie," said Charles, "how did you leave the Sheldens? Mary, you have lost one sweetheart—so mind you make a deal of the one that's left. Meaning me."

"And who has she lost, pray?" asked Lizzie. "It is no very serious loss, if it can be so easily repaired."

"She has lost Gillespie here, he is fallen desperately in love with little Bertha Vanston; he can't deny it—just look how he blushes!"

And, indeed, the boy did blush up to the whites of his eyes, and we three—unfeeling wretches—burst into peals of laughter.

“Oh, Willie!” I cried, “how can you be so faithless? Why, it is only a fortnight since you vowed yourself my worshipper.”

“But you laughed at me,” said poor Willie, recovering himself, “you laugh at everybody, you are always laughing; and Bertha is so serious.”

“That is quite a novel charm,” said Liz. “But I suppose you will tire of that too, and then come to *me*, Willie, for a broad grin.”

They continued their unmerciful raillery for some moments, until Liz was called away to the music-room, and Charlie strolled off to the card-table; and Willie and I were left together.

“You were only joking, Mary, when you called me faithless?” he asked, a little anxiously. “You know, you never would have cared for me in *that* way? But you look so strange to-night, so sad, you who were always so merry!”

“Not sad for your inconstancy, my friend,” I replied, smiling, and I laughed outright to see how he blushed at having betrayed his harmlessly conceited suspicion. “No, Willy, we are play-mates, nothing more. But do you really care for Bertha? Make me your confidante, do!”

“I worship her, Mary! She is like an angel—too pure and holy for love; *that* is too coarse and common a word to express a feeling for her. She is not so beautiful as you are; but she is so

—so—I cannot describe what I mean. She is like one of those lilies, that the Virgin is represented as holding in her hand. A lily that might have flowered in Heaven. You are——”

“Oh *I?*” I interrupted with sudden bitterness, “*I*—am an artificial flower, I suppose, that only blooms in a milliner’s window? Or, a gaudy rose, stained, and trampled underfoot—that has fallen from the bosom of some ballet-dancer, or singing girl—yet it is not the fault of the flower; that was fresh enough, till she profaned it.”

Then recovering myself, as I saw the look of blank dismay and astonishment in Gillespie’s face.

“Never mind, Willie, I was answering a thought which has nothing whatever to do with anything you said. Yes, Bertha

is sweet, and fair as a lily, but—will she care for you? does she care for any one except, perhaps——?”

And here I stopped, unwilling to betray Bertie's half-suspected secret.

“Oh,” said Willie, “I suppose you mean the French Count; but he is blind, and old—old enough to be Bertha's father.”

“Hardly that: he is not more than twelve or thirteen years older than she is!”

“That's old enough, in all conscience—besides, he is going away.”

“That would not help you much, if he took Bertie's heart with him.”

“But he wouldn't! Girls never give their hearts to men who have not asked for them—not modest girls, like Bertie! And he wouldn't ask for hers. Miss Shelden

told Dr. Garnet, that the Count would never marry, because he thought it would be wrong to ask any woman to share a blind man's fortunes."

"A girl may have a preference for a man without altogether giving him her heart—and such a preference on Bertha's part for M. de Montreuil would be quite fatal to any pretensions of yours, Willie."

"May be! I won't talk to you any more to night, Mary. You are not like yourself! you are so sharp and bitter. Are you vexed that Captain Brancepeth has hurt Stanton?"

"Oh, certainly—yes; you are very keen sighted, Willie! There are the bed-room candles brought in, light mine for me. We will talk about Bertie again, when Charlie's eye is well, and I am in a better temper."

And I departed, murmuring in my secret heart:

“No, girls never give their hearts un-asked—not ‘*modest* girls,’ says Willie; and of course, Willie is so experienced—he must know !”

CHAPTER VII.

GILLESPIE'S PLOT.

"Come on, and do your best

To fright me with your sprites—you're powerful at it."

A WINTER'S TALE.

THIS morning there was a tremendous hubbub. One of the servant girls had heard little Moustache whining and scratching at her door; and getting up to let him in, had seen, so she declared, the Ghost of the Bleeding Nun, gliding within a few yards of her, along the Corridor. The unlucky ghost-seer had, of course, been in hysterics, and fainting fits ever

since The servants were in the highest excitement; the housekeeper at her wit's end; and poor Lady Waldron alternately pitying the housemaid's suffering, and scolding her for her folly in mistaking her own shadow for a ghost.

In the breakfast-room, an animated dispute was carried on between ghost and anti-ghost parties. Some holding that it was merely a foolish, practical joke, played to frighten the maids, by one of their fellow-servants—or an imaginary phantom, evoked by their fear of the supernatural, and the family tradition of a haunted gallery; while others looked grave, and spoke of authentic stories of appearances that had been seen by their ancestors, or their near friends or relations—never I remarked, by themselves.

Willie and Liz sided with the scoffers;

Charlie, as before, choked with stifled laughter ; but Ella, a little to my surprise, frankly confessed that she was a little nervous about ghosts, and firmly believed in them ; and that if this one continued to "walk," she should at once terminate her visit, as she could not stop in a haunted house.

Her speech was broken off by the entrance of Sir Locksley, looking black and gloomy as a thunder-cloud ; and upon his guests referring to him for an explanation, or at least an opinion on the momentous subject, he so plainly showed his distaste to it by the brevity and abruptness of his replies, that, in courtesy to him, the conversation was changed, and the ghost argument dropped—at least for a time.


After breakfast, I followed Lady Wal-

dron into the sick girl's room, where we found her calmer, and the doctor coming in, I left her with him and her mistress, and retired to my own sitting-room, where I found Lizzie in close and apparently confidential communication with Willie.

"Here she is!" cried Gillespie, excitedly, "she'll do it—she has spirit enough to put out all the sham spirits in the county. Lock the others out, Liz—we'll hold cabinet council."

Thereupon, Miss Beauchamp proceeded to lock the door in our bed-room, which opened into Gabrielle's room; and then the sitting-room door; and having thus secured ourselves from any danger of indiscreet listeners, Willie opened the conference thus.

"You don't believe in this ghost, do you, Mary?"



"I? I should think not, indeed! I believe in no such rubbish!"

"And you would not be frightened if you saw it?"

"Pooh! I'd throw my candlestick at it!"

"You'd throw your extinguisher at it, you mean," laughed Willie. "Bravo, Mary. You do as I tell you, and we'll put an end to the Nun."

"Well—but—"

"Listen to me. This is a foolish frolic of some stupid fellows in the house to frighten the girls, and it annoys Lady Waldron very much."

"Naturally; but she says there is no such story in the family of an apparition—and Sir Locksley insists that there is. That is odd, is it not?"

"I believe," said Willie, "that Sir


Locksley himself is conniving at this silly trick. Perhaps he is the Nun himself."

"I cannot think that—he is not addicted to such gambols—and what would be his object? He could not want to frighten his servant maids!"

"He might want to clear the house of all his guests," suggested Liz.

I paused, suddenly recollecting what I had heard him say—that he "wished the house was clear of all the Tabbies;" but the next moment I dismissed the suspicion. There were plenty of ways of getting rid of guests, without the cumbrous machinery of pretended spectres.

"No, Liz. Sir Locksley would never make himself so ridiculous; but what can I do in the matter, Willie?"



"You can help me. You are a brave girl, and we will catch the ghost."

"Much obliged, dear boy—catch it yourself!"

"I can't—if a man interferes there may be a row, and a squabble; if we are found out, as, of course, we may be, a girl will only be laughed at, and commended for her valour."

Only a few weeks ago, I should have been charmed to enter into Willie's project; but now, I shrank from the fear of possibly drawing on myself the observation and comments of the household of Forest Court.

He was trying to overcome my reluctance, when a servant came to tell Miss Beauchamp that her sister had driven over to see her, and was waiting

downstairs. Away went Liz, promising to return soon, and telling me to be sure and keep the bedroom door locked, that Ella might not steal on our conference.

"I am so glad she's gone!" cried Willie, eagerly. "I wouldn't speak out before her, lest she'd peach. I say, Mary, it's that blockhead Charlie Stanton, who is playing the Nun!"

"Charlie? Never! — how do you know?"

"Don't you notice, how he cannot keep from laughing himself into fits whenever the ghost is mentioned? And how black Sir Locksley looks at him for it? Besides, I am sure it is he."

"And you think Sir Locksley helps him?"

"I am not quite certain about that;

but Charlie is the Nun ; I am not mistaken there ; and it is just like one of his stupid, practical jokes."

"Still, you may be mistaken."

"No, no. I am not. His bedroom is at the end of the lower corridor, just facing the foot of the staircase that leads to the West Gallery ; it is the only bedroom that commands the gallery-staircase, and the servants' corridor—it was once Sir Locksley's gun-room. So you see, nothing is easier for him, than to slip out when he likes, and parade about either in the gallery, or the corridor, and cut back into his own room, the way he came out ; or, if Sir Locksley *does* connive at it—through his dressing-room to the great staircase, before the servants could get up with him—even if they tried ; and they are all as scared as so many

rabbits. Another thing—he was away last week, for a few days—and there was no ghost; but directly he comes back—why, back comes the Nun! Oh, I know it is Charlie, and no one else.”

“Then he ought to be ashamed of himself, playing such vulgar, school-boy pranks; and they are very dangerous too—that poor girl is very ill this morning.”

“If you will do as I wish, Mary, we’ll punish him; but you must not ‘let on’ to Liz that it is he, or she’ll put him on his guard, because he’s her sweetheart.”

“Oh, now Willie,” laughed I, “that is too cruel of you! You have given one of my sweethearts to Bertie, and now you are giving the other to Liz! You leave me loverless!”

"No, indeed," rejoined Willie, "not while Brancepeth is to the fore. Aha!—see how she blushes! What colour are poppies, Miss St. Felix?"

"You might have said roses, when you wanted a comparison! but the roses and lilies are all for Bertha, I suppose, and only 'poppies and peonies' for poor me! However, Captain Brancepeth is no sweetheart of mine, Willie."

"Have you refused him?"

"He has never asked me—nor never will."

"Oh, come now, Mary! I say! why, everybody can see where *his* heart is—his eyes follow you about like—like a needle follows a magnet. He sees nothing but you when you move—he hears nothing but you when you speak. Not your sweetheart? O—o—h!"

I confess, Janey, that never was liquid

music sweeter to my ears, than that expressive "O—o—h!" of Willie's—but I defended Captain Brancepeth against the imputation, for all that.

"I *know* he will never be my lover, Willie. You are quite wrong."

"How do you know it? Has he said so to you?"

"Not to me, certainly; but—but he has said so. I have it on the best authority!"

"On the Delmar girl's, I daresay! A venomous cat! she would like to have all the beaux to herself—and she hates Captain Brancepeth, and you too."

"Me? That is nonsense—why should she hate me?"

"Because you are younger than she is, and prettier than she ever was. I see in her eyes that she hates you."

"That is your fancy, Willie. If she does, it is not for the reason you say. Ella is too confident in herself to be jealous of another woman's youth or beauty."

"Well, don't mind her, if she tells you Captain Brancepeth does not worship you. I am sure he does; and do not trifle with him, Mary, if you care for him. He is the best fellow going—brave as a lion—he has proved that in battle; and gentle as a girl to the weak. He's not like that sneaking—well, I won't mention any one; but there's not a lie in Brancepeth's soul! he is so true and honourable. Any girl might trust him, and be proud of his admiration!"

I laughed at Willie's enthusiastic praise of his friend—but it was very pleasant to hear; and my spirits rose to almost

their former pitch of gaiety, though I hardly know why. I fear I am rather frivolous—soon elevated—soon depressed !

Lizzie came back ; and the wily pair took advantage of my restored cheerfulness to enlist me as chief actor in their conspiracy against the ghost. It was neither more nor less than to give a duplicate representation of the phantom, and thus to scare the “mauvais plaisant” into a trap which Willie would prepare for his detention and exposure. The Nun, it seemed, was always first seen in the corridor, from which she rapidly glided up the staircase into the West Gallery and vanished there. Or, she was seen descending the staircase and coming towards the terrified spectators, who fled incontinently, without staying to watch the exact point at which she disappeared.

Gillespie's plan was, to array me in a dress

as nearly as possible resembling that the traditionary phantom was said (Sir Locksley *passim*) to wear ; or, if more frightful, so much the better. He and Liz would then conduct me, before the company retired to rest, to the great ball-room in the West Gallery, which they would leave by the door leading into a dismantled court below—and go round to the servant's corridor, locking the door behind them when they went, so that no one should have access to, or exit from, that room except from the gallery. They were then to rejoin the company, before all separated for the night, and when all was quiet, return to the foot of the staircase, opposite Charlie's room, where they would lie *perdus* in a small chamber used for a cloak and coat room, until I gave the signal by blowing on a silver dog-whistle of Lady Waldron's, which Willie would steal

for the purpose—when they would rush to my assistance, and capture the Bleeding Nun, No. 1.

My part in the comedy, was to wait for the spectre, in a deep recess, mid-way in the West Gallery, between the ball-room, and the staircase. A recess in which had stood a huge equestrian statue of a knight that had been removed to be repaired—and which was wide and deep enough for concealment, even without a curtain, which Willie proposed to hang across it, for greater security.


The spectre appearing, I was to wait until it had advanced well up to my hiding-place, when I was to steal suddenly upon it, trusting, that in the horror and surprise of so unexpected an apparition, he or she would take to instant flight. If he fled back by the staircase, he was to be pursued, and seized by my coadjutors in the cloak-room, at

the sound of my whistle ; if he took refuge in the ball-room, thinking to escape that way, I was to follow swiftly, draw the bolts on the gallery side, and Willie having locked the further door, we should have the fellow in a trap, whence to exhibit him to universal derision.

So far, I entered into Willie's plans with cordial glee, exulting (secretly, because of Liz) in the thought of punishing Charlie, not only for his present offences towards the general public, but against me in particular, yesterday. For all Charlie's broad shoulders and bluster, he is more than suspected by his friends, of tempering courage rather strongly with caution ; and he is the last person in the house to laugh at a supernatural appearance, if he were not fully satisfied that it was but an assumed one.

But there arose objections. "What if the ghost had resolved to suspend business? How long should I have to freeze in that cold draughty gallery? What if he took refuge in Sir Locksley's room, where I could not well pursue him? What if he were to fly *upon* me, instead of flying *from* me? What if my fellow conspirators, from forgetfulness or sleepiness were to fail me, or to be prevented by some accident from supporting me, and thus expose me to a really grave risk of misrepresentation—if the Phantom should call *his* co-operators to the scene of action?"


And at this last awful suggestion I had nearly declined *my* part altogether. But Willie overruled all my objections. He was sure the ghost would walk to-night (and he whispered in my ear, "Charlie is off home to-morrow.")



The gallery was heated all day with hot-pipes, and the weather was now mild for the season ; besides, the fun of the thing would keep me warm. He (Gillespie) would assuredly be on the watch, and would probably see the spectre as he went along the corridor before *I* should, and would follow, without waiting for my signal, and would be prepared to support me in all emergencies.

If Liz demurred to standing sentry with him in the cloak-room (as she seemed inclined to do) at least she would sit up for me by the fire in our sitting-room, put a light for me on our back staircase, and witness for me that she was also in the plot.

“If the Nun escaped into Sir Locksley’s room—why, that would be inconvenient, to be sure ; but no one could provide against




every accident. You must wait till it is nearer to your recess, and then contrive to get between it and the end of the gallery on which Sir Locksley's room opens, so that it must flee into the large ball-room, which is the trap."

"But, Willie, Liz cannot put a light on the staircase for me, because, to do so, she must pass through Ella's room, who sleeps with her door locked; and I shall have to return through the principal staircase, which is very awkward for me."

"Not a bit; what does it signify, when we shall be there with you, and the whole joke will have been played out?"

"But I should like to escape first. I do not care to figure publicly as your spectre-catcher."

"I'll do all I can—if there's no alarm, you can cross the main staircase unobserved—if



there's a bustle, it will cover your retreat that way; it will be supposed you came out, like the rest, to see what it was all about."

These points settled, it only remained to arrange for the form and materials of my disguise. The latter were soon extracted from Lady Waldron's stores in the great chests in the ball-room (when I took the opportunity of furtively searching for that fatal newspaper—but the whole pile had disappeared).

It taxed Lizzie's ingenuity, and mine, to devise a sufficiently horrific dress for our spectre, and we were a long time in manufacturing it. So long, that she is putting the finishing stitches to it while I am scribbling to you; and I must resume my narrative to-morrow, as it is time to dress for dinner. I wonder if Ella suspects that we

are up to some mischief? for she passed through the room while Willie and I were talking together in animated whispers ; and, as she glided by in her noiseless manner, she glanced from him to me with a smile that was only just not a sneer, and said,

“When the cat’s away, the mice will play.”

She is a *horrid* girl ! Adieu till to-morrow, my Jenny.

CHAPTER VIII.


A PAIR OF SPECTRES.

"But had thy love, still odiously pretended
Been, as it ought, sincere—it would have taught thee
Far other reasonings—brought forth other deeds.

SAMSON AGONISTES.

FOREST COURT, February 12th, 1818.

Little did I think, my Jenny, when I laid aside my last letter to you, that long weeks would elapse before I should be able to resume it. It is now ten days since I was first permitted by my nurses, to read the letters which have been addressed to me



within the last three weeks. My correspondents are so few, that the restriction was hardly called for. Only a few pages of girlish gossip from Mildred Forbes, and Helen Westropp. A note of Christmas congratulations from Mrs. O'Brien—a business letter (enclosing remittance—itsself enclosed to Selina Sheldon) from my guardian—and two long letters from you—in the last of which you scold me for my silence.

I am able to write now, and I have no greater pleasure than in writing to you. I shall resume my narrative just where I left off, nearly a month ago. It will be such a relief to me, to confide to some one the dreadful cause of my suffering. When you share the secret with me, it will seem less oppressive. I can only sit up to write for a short time, but I shall not forward this letter until it is finished.

The dinner-party on the day of Gillespie's plot was rather more lively than it had been on the preceding day—but there were no very young people present, except Liz and Willie. So cards were the amusement of the evening; there was no dancing—and Gabrielle was the chief, and almost the only musician. About half an hour before the usual time for retiring, Willie made me a sign, and I bade Lady Waldron good-night, and departed, to my private sitting-room, where Gillespie shortly joined me.

“Now, Mary!” he cried, “look alive! come along—we have twenty minutes safe. The servants are all at supper; we shall not meet one on our way to the gallery. The people in the drawing-room won't stir till bedroom candles are taken in.”

“But we must wait for Liz.”

“No such thing. Liz must keep watch, lest Ella should come out and look for you.”

“She will not look for me—she never does. Shall I put on the spectre dress?”

“Certainly not. I will help you with it when we reach the gallery; and if any of the servants *should* see us pass, they will take no notice—but you, in your nun’s dress, would raise the whole house on us.”

Accordingly, I accompanied Willie to the great ball-room, across the main staircase and hall; he, carrying my stage costume, which I proceeded to don over my usual attire, when we arrived at our destination. It consisted of a long, loose, dress, made out of one of her Ladyship’s finest sheets, along

one side of which we had stitched some broad crimson ribbon, to represent streams of gore. A white veil covered my head and face, with two holes cut out for my eyes, which, for better effect, were embellished with black borders (on the veil, I mean, not on the eyes) which gave them a very awful look indeed.

By a highly ingenious artifice, Willie had increased the supernatural terrors of my appearance, by rubbing my dress and veil well over with phosphorous—so that when I moved in the darkness, I emitted a pale, lurid light, which could not fail to appal a stouter heart than Charlie Stanton's—and to make this contrivance more effective, Willie desired me to be very careful with the dark lantern which he left me, and by no means to turn on the light except when actually necessary for my own guidance.

And having arranged everything to his satisfaction—seen me safely ensconced in my niche behind the curtain in the gallery—and reiterated his promise to watch in the corridor, and be ready to answer my first summons for support; away ran Willie, across the outer court, through the further door of the vaulted chamber, which he locked behind him.

Left alone in the darkness, my spirits sank a little. Not from fear of the spectre, assuredly, but from a misgiving lest the spectre should not come after all, and all my trouble have been in vain. Some doubt, too, crossed my mind of the prudence of this frolic. What if Mr. Beauchamp should hear and disapprove of it?

One comfort was—Captain Brancepeth was not in the way. I should never have had courage enough to undertake it if *he* had

been at Forest Court. Little did I think that he had returned there, and had been welcomed back in Lady Waldron's drawing-room just ten minutes after I had quitted it.


However, as I did not suspect this, and as it was too late to draw back, I heartened myself with the vindictive anticipation of that bear Charlie's consternation when he should find that, like the Witch of Endor, his pretended spells had evoked a real phantom, and I determined to spare him none of the tortures his folly had inflicted on the poor servant-girl.

The gallery was not cold; Willie had secretly kept up the fires by which the hot air pipes were fed; and he had had the further consideration to heap a pile of old cushions from the lumber-room in my recess — on which I reclined like an Eastern

Sultana ; and by and by, lulled by the warmth, the darkness, the silence—I fell fast asleep.

How long I slept I know not, nor can I tell what awoke me—for all was hushed and still, when I became suddenly conscious of where I was, and how I came there. All was still—and yet—surely, at the farther end of the gallery there was a faint rustling, and through the chink of my curtain gleamed a feeble light.

Very cautiously, I rose to my feet, and peeped through my curtain. A few yards from me—midway to the head of the staircase, a door stood partly open—the door of Sir Locksley's outer chamber ; and, faint as was the light from within, it enabled me to discern something moving noiselessly on the top landing. It called in a loud whisper to some one within the room.



“All right—not a soul stirring.” At which, the door opened wider, and a ray of light streamed full on the figure of—Sir Locksley himself! He wore a loose black velvet dressing-gown, and from his soft movements, I inferred that he had slippers on his feet.

The person he addressed said something which I could not hear, and he turned back, and looked round the gallery and into the vaulted room, moving on them the light of a small dark lantern which he held, exactly like my own.

My hair rose on end lest he should examine the recess in which I crouched—for of all men on earth, I would have least chosen Sir Locksley as my detector at that time of night, for it never occurred to me to endeavour to frighten *him*. Luckily, or perhaps, unluckily, as it turned out, he never glanced

behind my curtain, probably forgetting that the statue which had filled the niche had been recently removed.

He then stopped—turned his light full into the half-opened door of his room—and repeated a little impatiently, “All right—come along!” And forth glided—Gabrielle Delmar.

For a moment or two the frightful significance of this coalition did not strike me. I only saw in it a duplicate of the foolish, but very innocent conspiracy between Willie and me; and I looked with curiosity on my rival spectre’s “get up.” It was very simple—nothing of the Bleeding Nun about it—merely a white cashmere dressing-gown girt round the waist with a scarlet cord and tassels; her hair knotted loosely round her head, and in her hand a mask, which certainly might have produced a ghastly effect

when she put it on. But at her first words all thought of spectres, real or false, gave way in my mind to a deeper horror and disgust.

She came swiftly forward till she was within a few paces of my retreat, and passing her arm through her companion's, she said :

"All is safe—take a turn or two in the gallery with me, Waldron, before we part. You are in a great hurry to get rid of me, I am afraid."

"For your own sake, Ella," answered Sir Locksley. "We have met in this way too often, and you know it was against my advice that you came to night. That fellow, Stanton, I am sure suspects us, and if you had heard how Brancepeth preached at me, only yesterday. We ought to have stopped when the servants first caught a glimpse of

you. That lame story of the ghost frightens *them*, but does not impose on the other fellows."

She looked up in his face with a wistful inquiry in her eyes, which made me pity her.

"Waldron," she said, "why need we have met so often thus? Why need you have run the risk of compromising yourself and me? One word from you, and we may associate as openly as we did when I first came, and when you alone—and not for my sake, I think—exchanged our frank intercourse for a trickery of which you are the first to tire."

"Aren't you tired of it too?" he asked. "It is not so pleasant trotting about half across the house in the dark with the chance of catching cold, or catching scandal. I might have met you half way, Ellie, if my

stepmother had not packed you away in that hole-and-corner room, with those girls mounting guard over you. We must stop while the play is good—so let us kiss and part, my dear.”

“We will not part, Waldron, until you have renewed the promise——”

He interrupted her.

“Oh, come now, Ellie, be reasonable. I never made you any promise, nor ever asked one from you. You cannot tax me with that anyhow.”

“Did you not say again and again when we were at Belfast, that your only reason for not making me your wife was that you had nothing but your pay, and no settled home to offer me? and that if you were in your brother’s position, you would not lose a day in giving me your name and rank?”

“Well—but if I did, I told you too, that you were free, and that I should never wish to tie you to my uncertain fortunes. Faith, Ellie! you need not have hunted a fellow down, and brought all the old scandal on your own head and his, in the way you have done. You might have waited until affairs here were more settled——”


“How long should I have waited?” she said, bitterly. “Yet, Waldron, had I been the poor dependent I was when we parted, I should have allowed that parting to be final, and should never have pressed my claims on you. But I am rich now, and an heiress might be considered a fitter mistress for Forest Court than a portionless, friendless girl—such as I was then.”

“Certainly,” answered the Baronet soothingly, “you can make a much better marriage than our’s would be—and, once for

all, Ellie, you must give up that idea. I am still poor—poorer, by a title which I have no money to support. My brother left his estates encumbered.”

“But I am rich,” she pleaded, “and all I have is at my own disposal, all I have, Waldron, shall be yours!”

“Lord bless the woman!” he laughed, “what would your paltry hundreds do for me? Besides, if I marry, I must have birth and connection in my wife to strengthen my own position in the county. The Waldrons have made too many low marriages already. My step-mother is as good an old soul as ever breathed, but it is as much as I can do to hold my own with her on my hands; and, it is no use to mince matters with a woman of the world like you, Ella—but the little misfortune which graced the world with




your pretty self, 'is known and talked of, by our fellows, who knew you at Belfast; and the starched dowagers here would turn up their noses at you if I presented you to them as Lady Waldron, the younger. So you see, my child, it is no question of sentiment, we must think of policy, and each of us must do the best we can for him and her self."

Shocked as I had been by the interview I had involuntarily witnessed, this unfeeling speech of Sir Locksley's aroused all my pity and sympathy for his miserable victim; and, knowing the pride and haughtiness of Gabrielle's nature, I fully expected that she would at once leave him with the contempt he merited.

Alas! I had yet to learn the depths

of humiliation into which a woman may fall who has forfeited, with her own self-respect, her claims to the respect of others. It wrung my heart to see the unhappy girl abasing herself almost at the feet of the selfish brute who insulted her; and appealing by turns to his interest, to his honour, to his affection and fidelity (!) for the fulfilment of the pledge to which she had madly trusted. It sickened me to hear her, and yet I could not escape.

Suddenly, the thought flashed upon me, that at any moment Willie might return to see why I had not given the signal agreed on. If he came before the pair had time to regain Sir Locksley's apartments, or if they took refuge in the vaulted room, he could not fail to surprise them, and Ella would be disgraced and ruined for ever!




If I could only steal away in the shadow, when their backs were turned to me, I could rejoin Willie, and persuade him to give up our frolic, by pleading that I was tired.

But, for a long time Sir Locksley stood quite close to my recess, and both his face and Ella's were towards me.


At last, impatient of her importunity, he turned away, and strode off in the direction of the ball-room, and Gabrielle followed him.

Now was my opportunity. I caught up my lantern, and stole softly out of my niche, keeping close to the wall, in the deepest shadow, hoping to gain the staircase before the two could reach the vaulted chamber, which perhaps they would enter.



No! I had made but a few paces, when they stopped, and turned. Ah me! I was in deep shadow, it is true, but I had forgotten, in my excitement, that the phosphorous with which Willie had so plentifully besprinkled me, caused me to shine by my own light, like a glow-worm of the first magnitude. No sooner did their startled eyes rest on my lurid shape, than Sir Locksley dropped Ella's hand, which she had again placed through his arm, and reeled backwards, with an appalling oath. Ella stood firm, put her hand to her bosom, and I saw the glitter of the silver chasing of the small pistol her lover had given her when she first came to Forest Court.

In an agony of terror I turned the slide of my lantern full upon us all, shrieking wildly,



“Don’t shoot, Ella! It is I! It is Mary St. Felix!”

Too late—or—*was* it too late? Did I *dream* that I saw a flash of vindictive recognition in Gabrielle’s eyes, before—another, and different, flash—and I knew no more.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT LIZZIE CAN TELL.

FROM Miss Beauchamp to Jane.

I am ordered by Mary to write to you the narrative of what happened during the last days of my stay at Forest Court, as I witnessed it, and as I would write to my own sister. That is rather difficult, as I am a perfect stranger to you. Still, as I dare say you know, our Molly's friends rarely find in their hearts to refuse her anything she asks of them ; and just now, when she

is weak and suffering, poor dear, no one would dream of opposing any wish of her's. Besides, she wants you to know everything, and she wrote longer yesterday than she ought to have done in her present state; although the doctor says that she is doing well, and will soon be quite strong again. To begin as she bids me.

On that dreadful evening, when she left the drawing-room at Willie's signal, I remained behind in conversation with Charles Stanton, who appeared to have no suspicion of any plot being carried on; and a few moments later, Captain Brancepeth returned unexpectedly, having found, when he arrived in town, that the business which should have taken him into Shropshire was postponed.

His return at that hour rather delayed the breaking up of the party, and it was later

than usual when I followed Gabrielle Delmar into our rooms, where she bade me an abrupt good-night, and locked herself into her own room, as was her custom.

Before we left the drawing-room, however, Willie had contrived to draw me aside, and whispered,

"It is all right—she is safe, and quite comfortable in the West Gallery; will you come by and by and watch with me under the staircase?"

But this I declined to do. I was sure my father would be displeased at my doing so if he should hear of it, and Mary, poor dear, has no one to scold her if she is a wee bit too rash in a frolic.

So I dismissed Mr. Gillespie, promising to sit up, and keep a good fire, to be ready to receive Molly when she should have

played out her part. I *did* watch for a long time, and then, I was so tired, and I lay down on the bed for a moment, leaving the door ajar. Still, she did not come, and I began to think that we were making fools of ourselves for nothing, and to wish that she would come back, and we could all go quietly to bed. And so I dropped off to sleep. I must have slept very soundly indeed, for the first thing that awoke me was some one shaking me by the arm. I started up.

Miss Delmar stood by my bedside, in her white wrapper, as pale as any ghost.

"Wake, Lizzie, wake!" she cried. "Something has happened! Listen to the alarm-bell!"

And sure enough the alarm-bell, that stands at the head of the main staircase,


was ringing and clanging loudly, though the sound was rather deadened to us by the double doors that shut us off from that part of the house.

For an instant I was bewildered, and then I began to laugh. No doubt, some one had caught sight of *one*, if not both, of the spectres, and had set the alarm-bell ringing in his or her terror.

"Don't be frightened, Miss Delmar," I said, "it is only a trick that is being played off."

She looked at me with wide eyes, as if she did not hear me, so terrified was she. Then she recovered herself, and muttering, "A trick? What folly!" back she went into her own chamber, and bolted herself in as before.

Meantime that fearful bell clanged on for ten minutes; and I could hear people




running to and fro, and excited voices. I began to think I ought to go and look for Mary. I went out accordingly, and ran against Mrs. Judson, the house-keeper, who was rushing to Lady Waldron's room, and cried, as she passed me,

“Miss St. Felix is murdered! She is lying dead in the West Gallery!”

I flew like the wind at that. Sir Locksley's chamber-door stood open, and there were lights passing up and down in the rooms opening out of it. Without thinking of propriety, or even of what my dear papa would say, I dashed through those rooms, as the shortest way to the gallery, followed by some others among the guests who had been awakened by the bell.

Shall I ever forget my horror? A few




paces only from the head of the staircase lay our poor Mary apparently dead—still in her white spectral dress, but with the crimson stripes no longer needed to represent the blood which really flowed fast from her side.

Sir Locksley stood near her, trembling all over, and as pale as herself. Gillespie was wringing his hands and sobbing like a girl; and a confused and excited group of guests and servants was rapidly pouring in from different parts of the house.

Captain Brancepeth was kneeling by Mary's side, and had seemingly been examining her wound. He was speaking when I came up, in his clear resolute tones, which, though not loud, were distinctly audible above all the hubbub.

"Explanations are not called for now. You are losing time—who has gone for the doctor?"



No one, of course.

"I will go myself. I will go instantly!" said Sir Locksley.

"You? You are too nervous to sit a horse. Here—you, Gillespie—you may be trusted; take the swiftest horse in the stables—gallop off to Eltham, for Doctor Richards. Tell him to come prepared—a gun shot wound, remember; then go on for Willis—and Merton—bring them all."

"Why all?" enquired Willie.

"Lest any accident should delay one or other of them—fly! Waldron, where are the women?"

"Dressing themselves, I suppose. Curse them! they are only in the way when they are not wanted. Good Heavens, Brancepeth! the girl is bleeding to death."

"No, she is not," he answered, and in fact, at that moment, poor Mary opened her

cyss and looked round her. "Now, ladies," said Captain Brancepeth, as Lady Waldron and I approached, "she must be carried to her own room—make way, all of you."

"Carry her through my rooms—it is the shortest way," said Sir Locksley. "I will carry her myself."

But as he moved towards her, the sufferer, who had hitherto lain quite motionless, managed to writhe aside from him, and cast an imploring glance on her sailor friend.

"Stand back!" he said fiercely; "don't touch her!"

And Sir Locksley meekly obeyed; while Captain Brancepeth lifted her tenderly in his arms, and bore her swiftly and steadily, to her own room.

She had fainted away again before he

reached it; and laying her on the bed, he left her to the care of Lady Waldron and M.s. Judson, and retired into our sitting-room, beckoning to me to follow, so authoritatively, that I never dreamt of hesitating.

The next thing he did was to order everybody else out of the apartment—and *keep* them out by locking the door—then, turning to me.

“What can you tell me of this? how did Miss St. Felix come to be in the gallery at such an hour?”

And I turned “King’s Evidence,” against my fellow conspirators, and confessed all I knew. But it did not throw much light on the cause of poor Mary’s misfortune after all; and he was musing silently over my story, when Sir Locksley knocked at the door. He immediately let him in.

“Now, Waldron, give what explanation you like,” he said. “I shall be very glad to listen; this is a most unhappy occurrence for you.”

Poor Sir Locksley! I should have been sorry for him if I could have felt so for any one just then except Mary. He was so dreadfully shaken, and his eyes wandered restlessly round the room, as if he were looking for somebody or something he had expected, yet feared to see there. I wonder, was the ghost on his mind?

But neither could he give any satisfactory account of the accident—if it was an accident. He had been sitting up late, looking over his steward’s accounts, when he was startled by the report of a pistol in the West Gallery—and on proceeding to the spot, he saw Miss St. Felix lying, bleeding and senseless, on the floor, with a lantern, over-

turned, but still burning beside her—and no one near. Upon which he ran to give the alarm, and on going back, met Willie Gillespie, who had been also aroused by the pistol-shot—and that was all he could tell us.

When Gillespie returned with the doctor, he was questioned in his turn, but with no better result. He said, that after watching a little while in the corridor, he began to feel chilly, and thought he should like to smoke a cigar. So he betook himself across the Court to the back staircase, on which the vaulted room opens, (the door of which he had previously locked on the outside), where he could be within hearing of Mary's signal, and could smoke his cigar without fear of detection ; and then having finished his cigar, he waited until he got tired, and was beginning to think that he would go

into the gallery and propose to Molly to end the abortive comedy—when he was startled by a piercing shriek (we are tolerably familiar with Molly's shrieks, I can tell you) followed instantly by the report of a pistol.

Forgetting, in his excitement, that the door against which he leaned was locked on his side—he threw himself against it with such violence, that the key fell out, and rolled away in the darkness. Not stopping to look for it, he tore down the stairs, and so round to the gallery—passing Sir Locksley, who had just started the alarm bell, that roused us all.

And this was all Willie could tell us!

Nor have we ever been able to find the key to the mystery. When Mary herself was well enough to be questioned, she de-

clared that she had only a very confused recollection of anything that had passed that evening; but she rather thought that she must somehow or other have shot herself—which was clearly impossible, as she had no weapons, nor have any been since found in the gallery.

All sorts of contradictory suppositions are hazarded, but the general impression—which for obvious reasons, is not to be openly avowed—is, that Sir Locksley himself wounded her. Not intentionally, of course; but either from nervousness, or suddenly seeing such a terrifying figure parading his haunted gallery, or with the intention of frightening the person who had chosen such a disguise.

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whole affair has caused an immense deal of excitement and gossip in the county. Papa was very much annoyed at my part in the story, and came to take me home at once—though he allows me to come occasionally to spend a day or two with poor Mary, who cannot bear anyone but her own chosen intimates near her—and has so few of them.

Miss Shelden came to her at once, and has been most kind and attentive to her; and, since she has got better, Bertha has been allowed to spend a few days with her now and then. Lady Waldron has been like a mother to her, and even Gabrielle has passed nights by her bedside, when she was delirious with fever from loss of blood—though her visits have been rarer since she improved in health.

For some days she was in great danger, not from the wound itself, which was less serious than was at first supposed, but from extreme nervous excitability.

Nervous fever was apprehended. The bullet had entered her side, and passed out under her shoulder-blade. It had glanced from her steel busk, or it would have passed directly through her heart.

Only think, what a narrow escape for the poor darling! She has suffered a great deal, and is still very weak, though slowly regaining strength. Miss Shelden is most anxious to get her back to Lawn Cottage, but the doctors advise her remaining here for some little time yet, as they think her unfit to bear a long carriage journey over the rough forest

roads, and in this wintry weather—for it is still cold, and there are piercing north-east winds.

Meantime, the general excitement is subsiding a little, and although the house is kept quiet on her account; things are beginning to resume their usual aspect.

Sir Locksley has only two or three friends staying with him at present. Captain Brancepeth is still here, and so is Miss Delmar, though her visit will end with Mary's.

And now, I think, I may bring this letter to an end, and Mary may resume her pen. I wish she could resume with it her former gaiety and playfulness; but she is very much changed—I suppose from weakness. What would I not give to hear her pretty mischievous laugh once

more that used to provoke me so; and her large brown eyes have such a wistful look in them now, as they follow the movement of my pen over the paper.

But I have taken several days to write this, and I really think that her sweet face is a shade less thin and pale this morning; and she is gazing, with something like the interest she used to show in the little gifts that were made her, on a bunch of violets and wild primroses that Captain Brancepeth gathered for her this morning. To be sure, there may be another reason — but as she will read this letter, I had better be silent on the subject — a very delicate subject—to which I was about to allude.

(From Mary St. Felix)

Oh! the treacherous wretch! what was she going to say? I see I must not trust

her to carry on my correspondence. Tomorrow, I take it into my own hands again.


CHAPTER X.

ASPECTS OF LIFE.

"We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe, and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts to-day
Feel the gladness of the May,"


WORDSWORTH.

I AM allowed to receive visitors now—
think of that, Jenny! I sit in
the most luxurious of easy chairs, propped
with the softest pillows, wrapped in the
downiest shawls—in my little boudoir;
while good Mrs. Judson sits at her
needlework in the adjoining room, where



she can see my least movement, and be ready to wait on me at my first sign, while yet she is discreetly placed out of hearing of my friends' conversation, if they choose to speak in a lower key than usual.

To day I was abandoned by my Ashfield friends. Lizzie has gone home; and Selina took her offer of a seat in the pony-carriage to return to Lawn Cottage, as the old lady is not quite well; but she promised that Bertha should join me to-morrow, and remain until I was able to go back with her to her home. "Your home," Selina called it, and I liked to hear her say so. I begin to long for the quiet of that innocent home, with its calm atmosphere of purity. I have suffered so much here! and there is a kind of feverish excitement underlying the




stillness around me, of which, perhaps, my own nervous sensibility makes me more conscious than I should otherwise be.

I was sitting near the window, gazing out upon the park; it was a lovely morning, and looked quite spring-like in the sunshine, when a low tap came at the door, and Captain Brancepeth came in, with a basket filled with primroses and violets in his hand.

Now, Jenny, I will confess that many of the silent hours I have lately been obliged to spend have been occupied with meditations about this gentleman—especially about that letter of his which I read, and the conversation with Sir Locksley, which I overheard.

But the result of all these reflections is the conclusion that, whatever interest he




may have felt in me—and I cannot doubt that he does feel an interest in me—it will never find any greater expression than that of brotherly kindness, and good-will. If, as I believe, his self-restraint is caused by his knowledge of my mother's disgrace, I would not, if I could, overcome it. The prejudice may be a common one, for all I know, among men it may be a natural one; but I cannot help secretly resenting it as ungenerous; and knowing that it exists, I should always feel it as a covert reproach, which he might silence, but could not stifle if—if—well then, even if he were my lover.

And so, as he is not, and never will be, my lover—I have resolved to accept frankly and simply, the only relations that can subsist between us—those of honest, passionless friendship and kindness; and put

out of my silly head once for all, any coquettish desire for an admiration which would only be yielded reluctantly and under protest. So, Jenny, if I seem to mention Captain Brancepeth's name more frequently than others, do not smile, or look incredulous of my assurance that my regard for him is that of a friend, and nothing more.

I do not agree with Willie's dictum, that no modest girls give their affections unsolicited. A woman's affection cannot respond in a moment to a touch, like a tune in a musical box—and if she says "Yes," when she is asked "Do you love me?" surely her heart must have affirmed that fact before her lips confirmed it! I do not deny that I might have been proud and happy, if I had won Captain Brancepeth's affection; that I might even have returned it warmly too.



But then, you see, I have not won it—and I have received timely notice of this failure; and I have far too much pride to cherish any weak, sentimental yearnings for the love of a man, who, for no fault of mine, thinks me unworthy of it. He is right in withholding it, if he thinks I am, or ever would be, unworthy of it. To stoop to love where you cannot respect, *that* is a degradation to the nature of either man or woman, which I should abhor in myself, as I despise it in others. And so—once more and for ever, farewell to this first girlish dream of conquest. I resume my story.

He came in smiling.

“Lady Waldron told me that your Ashfield friends had left you, Miss St. Felix, and that perhaps, in your solitude, you would not refuse to welcome me, espe-

cially," (showing the flowers), "as I bring you 'the heralds of Spring.'"

"They are welcome, and so are you. Those you sent me the other day are not withered yet."

"They have lost their fragrance, though; they are like the keepsakes of some friend who is estranged from us; we will put these fresh ones in their places."

And my visitor ruthlessly flung into the fire the flowers in my vases, and called to Mrs. Judson.

"Mrs. Judson, would you be so kind as to bring fresh water for these vases? Now, Miss St. Felix, you shall take the blue violets, and I the white ones, and fill these glasses again. It will be a nice amusement for you. You look rather languid—are you suffering much?"


"No, not now; but I miss Selina and Liz."

"Well, you will have Miss Vanston to-morrow; it is a very great favour, I can tell you, that her cousin allows her to come here to be with you. You ought to be very grateful."

"So I am; and I shall be very glad to have Bertha with me. Do you know, Captain Brancepeth, I used to think her so much too quiet; and now her very quietness makes her company more pleasant to me. Liz is too noisy for me just now."

"Very likely," smiled my companion; "but you have Miss Delmar?"

I bent over my violets to hide my change of countenance; for at Gabrielle's name, I feel myself turn pale. When I looked up, his eyes were fixed intently on me, and I answered hurriedly.



"Oh, you know Ella and I never have got on very well, and I don't care to have her much about me; she is so much older than I am."

"True," he said, smiling mischievously, "there is an awful abyss of years between eighteen and three-and-twenty. But Miss Shelden is older still?"

"Yes—but—she is different."

"She certainly is," he assented, drily.

"And I used to be afraid of Miss Shelden; I thought her so strict, so severe; but she is very kind, really, and very indulgent, considering her views."

"Well," he laughed, "whatever may be her views, in your present condition you can hardly tax her indulgence very severely? Poor Miss Shelden she has

learnt indulgence by a very bitter lesson in past years, I have been told."

"Has she? tell me! I never heard of it."

"She had a young brother, of whom she was devotedly fond—she would have said that she 'idolized' him. A high-spirited, quick-tempered lad, who had been spoiled by his mother and sister, and was unaccustomed to restraint. In the first fervour of her religious 'awakening,' (I use her own terms still, which are not without their value, whatever Mr. Beauchamp may say), she unwisely substituted Mr. Prior's theories of discipline and responsibility for the truer instincts of her sisterly love. The boy rebelled; and after some stormy scenes, he fled from his home, and shipped himself on board a man-of-war. He fell over-

board and perished, only a few weeks later—and I believe poor Miss Sheldon has never recovered the grief and self-reproach his death caused her.”

“Oh, dear! what a terrible thing Life is. It seems quite full of pain and sorrow and ugliness of all sorts.”

“Not quite full,” answered my companion cheerily; “there is room for primroses and violets, and the joy in the Spring beauty which they foretell. Miss St. Felix, I am not surprised that you are languid—Mrs. Judson keeps your rooms a great deal too hot; you are pining for fresh air. Do you think you could bear the open window for a few moments? It is as balmy as May to-day.”

“Oh! I should like it of all things, but Mrs. Judson will cry out on you!”

“She has quitted her watch—I saw her

leave the room while you were speaking; let us take advantage of her absence; but I shall open the further window, there is a draught to this—and only for a moment or two.”

He did so, and then returning to me, folded some shawls carefully over my shoulders and head; and leaning on his offered arm, I rose and walked slowly to the window, and looked out into the soft spring sunshine. It was all so fresh and fair; the grass lightly dappled with shadows of the slender ilex branches; the horse-chestnuts just putting forth their velvet buds and the ivy on the stems of the oaks and beeches glittering as if to make the most of its beauty, before it was eclipsed and forgotten in the flush of the coming foliage. The deer were tossing their antlered heads, and leaping now and then at some drooping

branch which tempted them with a green leaf or sprout. The birds were singing their loudest, and the air was rich with that indefinable fragrance of early spring—the scent of unopened leaves and buds.

As I stood there with Captain Brancepeth's arm round me, holding my shawl about me, I was conscious of being supported by a strength that could sustain me against any adverse influence, external or internal—"the world, the flesh, or the devil,"—and guarded with such tenderness as that with which a child holds a wounded bird. I gazed out on the fair landscape beneath me, and sighed softly.

"Oh, how beautiful is Life!"

He made no reply, only held me a little closer to him, as he drew my shawl more

over me, to shield me from the cold. Then, still keeping his arm round me, he shut the window, led me back to my chair, and arranged the cushions, and coverings about me. Oh, so tenderly! I should think that his wife, when he has one, will not feel as I do, the need of a mother.

"That is enough for a beginning," he said. "If the weather continues, perhaps Dr. Willis will give you leave to go for a short drive to-morrow."

"I won't drive—I will go into the shrubberies. I want to gather some violets—only *one* violet for myself."

"You are not satisfied with my gathering? very well—you shall gather some for yourself—but perhaps not to-morrow. You look tired now."

"I am not tired. You shall see. I am



going to finish filling that vase ; give me my flowers."

But the flowers dropped from my listless fingers, and I had to lie back on my cushions and rest.

He looked anxiously at me, and then took in his my pale hands which had fallen on my lap.

"What a poor thin little hand !" he said, "poor little patient child ; how you have suffered !"

I ought to have withdrawn my hand, I suppose ? but it really did not occur to me to do so ; and, as if obeying an almost involuntary impulse, he suddenly stooped, and kissed it ! How I rejoice now, that I read that letter of his. I might otherwise have entirely misconstrued an act of simply compassionate kindness.

The next moment he let my hand fall—

and I wished I had withdrawn it myself first ; and then the door gently opened—and in glided Gabrielle Delmar.

CHAPTER XI.


WAS IT PARSONS?

“Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness.”

WORDSWORTH.

SHE came up to me, looking as perfectly self-possessed as ever. Oh! how could she? I could not help shrinking from her, though the involuntary movement brought me so close to Captain Brancepeth.

She did not seem to notice—she stopped a few paces from me, and fixed her large dark eyes steadily on mine.



“So glad you are well enough to receive visitors, Mary,” she said, “but your friends (with a glance at Captain Brancepeth) must be careful not to overtax your strength.”

“Is that a hint for me to take my leave, Miss Delmar?” asked my companion with a smile.

“You have had your audience, Captain Brancepeth,” she replied, “and others are waiting *their* turn now. Lady Waldron is at the door, with her son——”

“No—no!” I cried excitedly, “I will not see Sir Locksley—don’t let him come in, Captain Brancepeth!”

He hesitated an instant, and then said soothingly,

“He will not stay long; *try* if you can receive him. You can hardly refuse him in his own house you know?”

Gabrielle's steady eyes had never moved from my face.

"Perhaps — some other time?" said she.

But almost without knowing what I did, I laid my hand on my sailor friend's arm with a clinging, eager clasp.

"I will see him now, at once! only don't go away—don't leave me."

And before he could answer, Lady Waldron, followed by Sir Locksley, came into the room. Still looking at me, Gabrielle drew back swiftly and silently, retreating into the adjoining room, where she stood motionless in the shade of the window-curtain.

Captain Brancepeth placed a chair for Lady Waldron, and stood leaning on the back of it when, nodding and smiling at me, she sat down. Sir Locksley came to-

wards me with extended hand, but I shrank from him, and hid my hands under my shawl. He should not touch the hand a true friend had caressed so recently ; and then, recollecting myself, I just coldly touched his palm with the finger-tips of my left hand.

He tried to appear easy and unembarrassed, but I knew by the way he avoided my eyes, and gnawed the ends of his moustache, that this interview, the first he had had with me since I was wounded, was very disagreeable to him—the wretch ! I would have made it more so if other considerations had not withheld me.

“ You see, Captain Brancepeth,” said Lady Waldron, “ that you are not allowed to be a privileged visitor to our dear little Mary. Since she is able to receive you, she may receive my step-son, and

he has been anxious for a very long time to see her. You have no idea, my dear child," (to me) "how unhappy he has been about you."

To this speech I attempted to return a courteous smile, but could only achieve a wan grin. Sir Locksley followed his step-mother's lead.

"Upon my soul, Miss St. Felix, (much he cared about his soul!) upon my sacred honour (*his* honour!) I would rather that Forest Court had been burnt to the ground, than that such a misfortune should have happened. If you would—if you could, I mean—give me any clue to the blackguard who did it; faith, I'd take care that he should never fire a pistol off again in his life."

The figure beside the window curtains,


opposite to me, moved slightly; and as the light fell on her white, set, features, I could see her eyes still fixed on me.

“Indeed, Mary,” said Lady Waldron, “we all think it would be better if you could try and give us some clue, as Locksley says, to the person who injured you. Anything like a mystery always raises such gossip, and there are some very silly reports going about.”

“What reports, Madam?” I inquired, and Captain Brancepeth interposed.

“You will frighten our patient, Lady Waldron. The report she wishes you to contradict, if you can, Miss St. Felix, is that our host here, himself wounded you.”

“I do not think it was you, Sir Lock-



sley," I answered coldly. "I have heard that you never miss your aim. If you had meant to frighten me only, you would not have hurt me; if you had meant to kill me, I should not have been here now."

"But who was it, my dear?" persisted her ladyship. "You must have a suspicion, at least. Do not attempt to screen him—if it was one of the servants now? It will not hurt him to say so now that it is all over, and you are getting better."

Sir Locksley looked very earnestly at me.

"Shall we say that it was Parsons?" (Parsons was his confidential valet, and an old soldier.) "I suspect Parsons, he is confoundedly afraid of ghosts, and would fire at any thing that alarmed him; it's

a natural impulse with Parsons to shoot at things. Was it he, Miss St. Felix?"

I remained silent for an instant, while they all gazed at me—no, not all; I glanced at Captain Brancepeth, his eyes were fixed upon the ground, but those eyes in the adjoining room seemed to blaze upon me in their keen intensity.

"Sir Locksley, and all of you, if you torment me for ever, I shall only repeat what I have said, when I was first questioned on this subject. I cannot tell you anything; and it vexes me, and worries me to be asked to remember anything about it. It was an accident, of course, and how could I see who did it, in that dark gallery?"

"As for that," remarked Captain Brance-

peth quietly, "if he could see you, you could see him?"

"Not at all. I was shining with phosphorous; and I had a light, and—I won't be bothered any more; if the subject is ever alluded to again in my presence, I will say, Sir Locksley, that it was you, who shot me."

At this unexpected menace, the Baronet recoiled, and I fancied, Captain Brancepeth laughed.

I resumed.


"I was justly, even though severely punished, for taking part in such a silly and dangerous frolic—and I bear *no ill will at all* to the person, whoever it was, who inflicted the punishment; and it was, doubtless, entirely an accident—and—and—I am very tired; please go away, all of you."

"Yes, go away," said Ella, in her usual calm voice. "You have been very thoughtless, you have quite exhausted the poor girl. Look how deadly pale she is!"

Sir Locksley rose immediately, and gave his arm to his step-mother to lead her away.

"We will leave Miss St. Felix to her friend's care," he said ; and Lady Waldron kissed me, and left the room with him. Captain Brancepeth lingered a step behind them, and glanced from Gabrielle to me.

"Are you a qualified nurse, Miss Delmar?" he asked. "She needs great care in lifting her ; and she seems too tired to raise herself. She should be carried back to her bed. Shall I ring for Mrs. Judson?"



"Presently," answered Gabrielle. "Will you take my arm, Mary, and I will lead you back to your room? How pale you are!"

But I could not help shrinking from her, and Captain Brancepeth rang the bell, while Ella stood silently looking at me, but with a pitying softness now in her eyes. Pity! and for *me*! Ah! it was not *I* who was most to be pitied.

Mrs. Judson came in, and Gabrielle abruptly turned away and left the room, and was immediately followed by my remaining visitor. When Mrs. Judson had got me into bed, I fainted away.


When I recovered, the doctor was beside me, and questioning Mrs. Judson and Ella, who were the only others in the room.

"What imprudence has she been committing?" he asked, "to bring on this attack? She was going on admirably yesterday."

(I secretly congratulated myself that neither of my attendants had witnessed my little excursion to the open window, they would both of them have laid the blame on that). Ella answered.

"I think she had too many visitors this morning. Her Ladyship came in with Sir Locksley, and Captain Brancepeth, and they pressed her to tell them what she knew of—if she knew who had hurt her, I believe; and she was over-excited, and annoyed too."

"Excited?" repeated the doctor, "I should think so! To choose such a subject of conversation as that, in her weak state!



And three—four—four persons in her room at once. You ought all to be ashamed of yourselves! Now, Mrs. Judson, my orders are that only one friend of this young lady's is to be admitted into her room at a time, until I give her leave to see more. And mind, no allusion whatever is to be made in her presence to anything connected with her accident. Now, can I trust you to see these orders carried out?"

"But if my Lady comes in—" began Mrs. Judson, and Gabrielle interrupted her.

"You can trust me, Dr. Willis. I will stay with Miss St. Felix, and see that no one else comes near her until you call again to-morrow."

As she said this, a languid fear flitted across my brain. "Perhaps she will finish the good work she began, and essay to

smother, or poison me. But I was so weak just then, that I did not feel as if I cared much, and as my eyes met hers, she stooped over me, and lightly smoothing back the hair that had strayed over my forehead, she repeated gently,

“ You may trust me.”

And I did trust her then.

“ Well,” said the doctor, “ I leave her in your charge—draw down the blinds—keep everything quiet; give her this anodyne, and let her sleep as long as she will. She will be all right to-morrow.”

And all his directions being scrupulously followed, I presently fell into a deep slumber. I awoke calm and refreshed, and rather hungry, and looked about for any chance of something to eat. It was dark, and Ella was sitting by the fire, a book in her hand, and a shaded lamp on a small

table beside her. Her face was partly turned to me, and had a sad worn expression, in which was nothing of the proud bitterness it often showed. She did not look at all as if she meant me any harm; and I took courage to call her, and ask for some nourishment.

Thereupon she rang the bell, and Mrs. Judson came in, with some palatable dainty on a tray, which I proceeded to devour with such good effect, that I presently began to feel quite cheerful, and even began to prattle, and laugh a little. But I became serious enough when Gabrielle said,

“You may go downstairs, Mrs. Judson, now, to your own tea. I will stay with Miss St. Felix until supper time, when I will resign my post to you for the night.”

I objected, with rather ungracious eagerness.

“It is not necessary that you should stay with me, Ella; go down to Lady Waldron. I shall be very well alone.”

But she only returned a rather melancholy smile, keeping silence while Mrs. Judson stirred the fire, shook up my pillows, arranged the lamp so that it should not glare on me, and finally took up the tray and quitted the room. And then Gabrielle locked both the inner and outer door, and came back to my bedside.

CHAPTER XII.

ELLA'S REMORSE.

"Our care and pity is so much upon you
That we remain your friend."

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA.

SHE came back to my bedside, and while I still gazed at her with surprise and inquiry, she sank down on her knees, covering her face with her hands, and said, in a low but firm voice,

"Mary, I ask your forgiveness."

I was too nervous, too startled, to reply immediately, but at length I managed to say,

"Do not kneel to me, Ella, I entreat you, I forgive you freely. You did not hurt me *intentionally* did you? Say that you did not and I shall believe you!"

She raised her head, and bent her eyes steadily on mine.

"Mary, but for God's mercy, I should be now a murderess."

I was deeply shocked at this confession, although it had not been quite unsuspected; the truth would always have been voluntarily suppressed in my own mind, as something too hideous to allow.

"Oh, Ella!" I faltered, "how could you be so cruel? I never injured you."

She answered.

"It was the evil impulse of a moment; but it was an impulse which I obeyed. You had my secret, you had me in your power, to expose, to disgrace, to ruin me."

“How could you think,” I said indignantly, “that I would do that? How could you think me capable of betraying you, were you the vilest creature that breathed?”

“No, no, I know *now*, that you are incapable of it—but *then*, I fancied that you were there with the express intention of surprising and exposing me; and that you were urged on by others.”

“By others? What others? Who could have any interest in disgracing you, and those whose guests we were?”

“Oh, don’t ask me!” she answered wearily, “it was a mad, bad dream—but you forgive me? From your heart! See, I kneel to you for forgiveness.”

“From my heart I do. But rise, Ella, it hurts me to see you humble yourself to me. It is not to me that you should kneel for

pardon—and since you have repented, you are doubtless forgiven.”

“Repented?” she said, rising and resuming her seat by the fire. “It was not so much repentance that I felt, and feel, as remorse, for having misjudged, and injured you. Still, Mary, I said to myself, ‘She is too generous to betray me voluntarily, but when her friends press her to tell all she knows, she will not perhaps be able to resist them,’ and I would not ask your forgiveness until I was sure of your resolution, lest you might think I was only pleading for secrecy; but since you have maintained your reserve with Captain Brancepeth——”

“With Captain Brancepeth?” I exclaimed in astonishment. “He is about the last person I should think of confiding such a secret as *that* to! How could you imagine it for a moment?”

"I fancy that he suspects me, and that he would try to get from you some confirmation of his suspicions."

"Then you understand him as little as you do me. As if he could be so mean—so unmanly. Do you know at all what a true gentleman is like, Ella?"

She smiled slightly—her cold smile, as of old.

"Well, do not be angry with me. At least, I know that your friend dislikes me, and has done so from the first day we met." (Here I had a remorseful twinge, for had I not, by suffering him to believe Ella guilty of my fault, assisted in prejudicing him against her?)

"I know that he thinks me unworthy to brush the skirts of your garments—which may be true enough; but what right has he to assume it? Oh! I have watched

him, and seen how he has hovered round you to preserve you as far as possible from the taint of any contact with me. Do you remember that night—it was the only night I think, that you waltzed with Sir Locksley?”


“I remember it but too well; you gave me bad advice that day, Ella, and by following it, I certainly could not have lessened Captain Brancepeth’s prejudice against you—if he has any. I do not know what could have been your motive for persuading me to act in a way that must have lowered me in his eyes; though mind—I take the full share of blame on myself for yielding to your persuasions.”

“Why, what did you do so very wrong, after all?” she answered. “You wore a dress a little less *béguile* than usual, and you coquetted a little—nothing more. To

tell you the truth, Mary, I wanted to vex your sailor favourite, and punish him for the insolence with which he guarded you from my intimacy—at least in public—by showing him that, if I chose, I could draw you to me through all the gossamer webs with which he was fencing you from me.”

“Then,” I cried wrathfully, “I think your conduct was most treacherous and abominable. I find it far more difficult to forgive than if you had shot me ten times over!”

“Mary,” she rejoined, “you must forgive me that too, for, indeed, I did not intend to do more than show my power for one evening. No danger at all that Captain Brancepeth would lay the fault—if fault there was—on you! Why are you looking so pensive? he has forgotten it long since!”



But my thoughts had gone off on a different track altogether, as I remembered the morning that had followed that frivolous night. The conversation in the vaulted room, between Sir Locksley and his cousin, and those fatal newspapers.


"Ella," I cried suddenly. "Will you answer me truly, frankly—one question—only one?"

"Yes, I promise you. You have a right to ask what you will of me."

"Oh, I do not desire to ask any confidence of you regarding yourself. I only wish to ask you—do you know anything of—of—my family history?"

She looked at me with surprise, and some curiosity, and hesitated a little, as she answered,

"I do not quite understand your question."



“Frankly, then—do you know anything of my mother?”

“Ah!—yes, I recollect you asked me that once before ; and my answer now, will be the same. I know nothing whatever of your mother, Mary. I never heard of her in my life. I give you my word.”

“Then it must have been the newspaper,” I said, absently. “Let us drop the subject, Ella. There is something else I want to say. No one here will ever hear from me what you would wish kept secret ; but I have one friend, from whom I conceal nothing. I cannot include her among those towards whom I shall maintain silence.”

“Her !” exclaimed Gabrielle hastily, “You do not mean Lizzie Beauchamp?”

"Certainly not. It is a school friend of mine—a girl who is confined to her couch, and who lives far away in Westmoreland. I can trust her entirely; and she will never mix in any society where your name can be known."

"I see," replied Gabrielle, a little scornfully. "It is a kind of safety valve for secrecy, I suppose, to which I must not object. But, one question in my turn, Mary——"

She paused, hesitated, and at last, with a manifest effort,

"Did you overhear the whole conversation between Sir Locksley and me, in the gallery that night?"

"Not all," I answered, looking away from her. "You spoke so low, and were sometimes a long way off."

"I have been very imprudent," she re-

joined, "but—it will all come right one day—give me time, Mary, and you will find all will be repaired."

"Oh, Gabrielle! that can never be! No good can come from sin and folly like this. Break away from this degrading bond—from this unworthy passion. Leave this place—leave it at once, before ruin and dishonour fall upon you. I entreat you by all that you have suffered—go away at once; if you linger, you will be lost. Your own heart must tell you, that the man you trust is wholly worthless!"

"My heart," she answered, "tells me nothing of the sort. What woman's heart would ever tell her such a truth as that—if truth it were. Oh, you foolish Mary? But yes—I will go—I am going. I shall not go far, or for very long—and I shall return to Forest Court as the wife of its owner; and

I may thank you for that, when it happens, Mary—for had you disgraced and exposed me, my chance would have been gone. *He* would not then have dared to affront the prudes and bigots here, by giving me his name and rank.”

“And you can care for a man whom you admit to be such a selfish coward as that?”

But before she could reply, Mrs. Judson came back to relieve guard, and she retired, leaving me to repose, which I now greatly needed. Oh, the misery! the profound humiliation it must be to a woman to have loved—even for a day—for an hour—a man whom she must consciously mistrust and despise !

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAPTAIN REMONSTRATES.

YOU will begin to think with me, Jenny, that it is fated that I should not leave Forest Court (Oh! don't be frightened, my dear; I am not going to marry its master!) No, it is the Doctor who keeps me here. It seems I do not get strong quick enough to please him. He says, I require great care. The bitter north-east winds have set in with more than their usual persistency at this season. I am not allowed to stir out of my rooms, which are kept

always at an equal temperature; and when I speak of Ashfield, he laughs in my face.

“Ashfield? my dear young lady! why, it is as cold, and damp as a cellar, with all the fogs of the Eltham marshes blowing over it. And to Lawn Cottage, too! A charming summer place, but draughty—with the river dams rising into every window, and all ventilation choked by those huge evergreens in the garden. Why—the warmest room in Lawn Cottage is many degrees colder than the halls or staircases here. No! no—you must not think of removing from Forest Court until the Spring is more advanced; and you must not go out of these rooms, much less into the open air, until we have a south wind again, and plenty of sunshine with it.”

And so here I am still; it is more than a

week since I last wrote. I wonder Lady Waldron is not sick of the sight of me. More than ten weeks! What an unconscionable visit! And such a train as I bring with me, too—as I *entail* on my unfortunate hostess. Selina and Bertie coming backwards and forwards to wait on me—for a few days at a time. The Beauchamps driving over once a week to ask after me, and the Stantons, and Willie Gillespie lounging in to lunch, or dinner, with the same friendly object.


As for Ella—she seems a fixture—and so, for that matter, is Captain Brancepeth too; but I believe he is going home shortly to receive his mother and the Admiral, who will return from Nice next month. Lady Waldron does not appear to care—indeed, I think she likes this sort of running in

and out better than more ceremonious visiting.

And how do *I* like my forced detention, you ask—and I scarcely know how to answer you.

Everyone is so kind to me. I am so used to the place—so much at home in it—that, if I were as innocent, or as ignorant, as I was, when I first came, I should feel very unwilling to go away. But—knowing what I *do* know—I am conscious of being in a false position here. I seem to be breathing an impure atmosphere, if not of falsehood, still of concealment, of reserve, as concerns myself; and of something like complicity in the deceit of others.

If only Ella would go! But she quite coolly assumes it to be a recognised arrangement that she is to stay here as long as I do; and makes herself so agreeable and



useful to the old lady, that I believe she would be really sorry to part with her.

I am glad to say, that I see very little of her now. Her room was given up at first, to my nurse and attendants, and she departed to another part of the house. Now Bertie or Selina sleep there when they are here, and Mrs. Judson on the few nights I am left alone.

As for Sir Locksley—I never behold his face. He sends civil messages of inquiry from day to day—which are as civilly replied to—and there ends all our intercourse, for which I am most thankful. I understand that he keeps up his shooting and hunting-parties, and that there are several men now staying with him; but there are not more than one or two ladies; and, my apartments being away


from the reception-rooms, I hear nothing of them.

Of late, my thoughts have been very perplexed and melancholy. I cannot help feeling that I am lonely—no home—no kinsfolk—no mother! That is the worst. A dead mother I could weep for. A mother in Heaven I could yearn to, and dream of. But a mother still living, perhaps, but lost—for ever lost to me! And then I ask myself, where is this most unhappy mother? Has she married the man for whom she deserted her little child—I must have been quite a baby!—or has *he* in turn, abandoned her—is she living in disgrace—in poverty! Poor mother!

Perhaps she has deeply repented, and longs, but longs in vain, for some news of her orphan daughter; for some word, or sign, of pity and forgiveness—or of love.

Could I love her? Would it be my duty to love her, if she pleaded for my affection? Can any sin, any crime even, on a mother's part, render forfeit her claim, if she chooses to assert it, to the heart of her child?

I can only say, that I am afraid I could not help shrinking from such an appeal, if made to me by one whose guilt has branded me with a reproach so bitter, and yet, if she is more lonely than I am—if she is ill—if she is repentant—if she suffers? And this I have no means of knowing. I have the memorandum that I copied from that paper—of the name of the man with whom she fled from my father—the son of Lord Desborough. But that does not tell me much. How can I make inquiries, and of whom, to ascertain whether or no she re-married, and whether or no, she



still lives? I cannot think of anyone to whom I can make so sad a confidence; and I could never bring myself to name her with affected indifference.


Could I confide in Captain Brancepeth, and ask him to——Oh no, no! a thousand times, no! I could not speak on such a subject to him. I feel already too deeply humbled by the pity with which I know he regards me, for a misfortune of which he probably supposes me ignorant. To ask his sympathy? Never!

Mr. Beauchamp? he is a man of the world—a father of a family—a clergyman. The inquiry I would institute, would be simple and natural for him, and perhaps even easy. But then, Mr. Beauchamp has never the shadow of a secret from his

fat little wife, and she, I suspect, has none from her children. I could not run the gauntlet of the good-natured, noisy kindliness of all those warm-hearted, but not very delicate, youths and maidens.

Stop—I have it! There is M. de Montreuil; he has been my confidant already, you may remember, for no better reason than that he was blind, and could hear, but not see me, like a priest in a confessional. I know he is delicacy and refinement itself; and as he goes frequently into society—not only into Ashfield society, but in London—I know he belongs to one of the clubs—he will have no difficulty in making inquiries, without in the very least involving me in any suspicion of being interested in them.

I have no need of such a mother, if she



is rich, and happy—*can* she be happy? and has no need of me. But, if otherwise. Oh, Vivian Brancepeth, my friend! you, who think that the whiteness of an innocent life can reflect the stain upon another's—you may learn, that by patiently accepting the stain, it may be permitted to efface it—as it could never do—while isolating itself in the pride of its own selfish purity.

Poor mother!

But how to get at M. de Montreuil? for he does not visit here; and he will probably set off for his new property in France before I return to Lawn Cottage. I must practise some little arts of diplomacy to accomplish that end. In good time! Here comes Bertie. Dear little angel, it will be easy enough to hoodwink

her. You shall have the results of my conference later.

* * * *

It would appear, however, that dear little angels can open their eyes like ordinary mortals; for at my first address, Bertie opened her eyes very wide indeed. To be sure, I was rather more abrupt than I had intended to be.

"Bertie, how is it that M. le Comte has never called to see me since my accident? I think it is very unkind of him."

"Called here? Why, Mary, you know M. de Montreuil keeps no carriage; how could you expect him to walk eight miles to ask for you, when he can hear of you any day from Selina?"

"Oh, *walk*? no. But he could have driven over with Charlie, or Mr. Beauchamp."

"But he does not visit at Forest Court."

"All the same, he might have come for me."

And Bertie turned her full blue eyes on me, with such an astonished stare, that I began to feel discomfited.

"You never showed so much interest in M. de Montreuil, Mary, that he should think you expected such an attention from him; and you have only known him a month or two, before you came here."

"Never mind; I should like to see him. I want to see him. Do you think he would come if you asked him?"


"Of course he will come, if you really wish it, but I know he does not like what he has heard of the people here; and so—cannot you wait to see him at Lawn Cottage?"

"No, I must see him at once. I have a particular reason for wishing to speak to him."

Bertha looked more surprised than gratified, and I hastened to add.

"Yes, Bertha, I feel a conversation with M. de Montreuil would be good for me. I am in low spirits—from weakness, I suppose; and I think he would comfort me. You, who know him so well, have you not often felt that his own sorrow has given him a truer insight into the sorrows of his friends?"

"Ah," said Bertie, softly, "I have never thought, when with him, of any sorrow but that of *his*."



Her words turned the current of my thoughts. I looked at her earnestly. Her fair cheek was tinted with the very faintest blush, and her sweet lips trembled.

"You are so fond of M. de Montreuil, Bertie, what will you do when he is gone away?"

She answered smiling.


"Just what I do now when he is gone away, Mary."

"But you will never see him again then?"

"And he never sees me now; but I shall see him with my soul, as he sees me always."

"What will you do if he writes you word that he is married?"

"What *could* I do, but pray that *she* might be always guided and strengthened to be his help and comfort."



“You might as well pray that *he* might be a help and comfort to her.”

“Oh, that—” and Bertie stopped short, coloured slightly, and then said, “Let us return to what you were saying just now. I am to ask M. de Montreuil to come and see you. Will it do next week, when I go back?”

“Certainly not, I want him at once.”

Bertha hesitated. I fancied for a moment, that she was embarrassed, lest he might think that she sent for him on her own account. I was wrong. Whatever may be the nature of her feeling for the blind Count, it is too purely selfless to be crossed by any shadow of doubt, or fear of misconstruction. She said with perfect simplicity.


“Captain Brancepeth is going to ride over to Ashfield this morning; he offered

to take any message to Selina for me. I shall go, and tell him to call on M. de Monteuil, and say that you wish to see him directly."

And she walked quietly away in search of my friend, leaving me rather discomposed, at her unexpected choice of a messenger. I was still more discomposed when my "Sailor Poet" came into the room in his riding dress.

"Your most obedient, Miss St. Felix, Mrs. Judson tells me that Miss Vanston has been asking for me, and that I should find her here. How well you look this morning, you have quite a colour, and yet, no; I am afraid it is too much of a flush to be altogether satisfactory."

"Never mind my colour," I said petulantly, "Bertie went to ask you to take a message to Ashfield."



"Certainly. A message from her, 'to Miss Shelden?'"

"To M. de Montreuil."

"Whew," (a low whistle) "I beg your pardon, Miss St. Felix, for being so rude. Are you charged to transmit the message."

"It was from me to the Count, not from Bertie."

"From you? I am at your service. What am I to tell M. de Montreuil? I scarcely know him, it is true; and I thought your acquaintance was not much closer. I was mistaken it seems. Well, what am I to say?"

"Say, please, that I want him to come to me, one day, the earliest he can spare. I particularly wish to see him."

"Very well. Good morning."

The adieu was spoken very coldly, and

my visitor bowed, and had turned to the door, when he suddenly paused, looked at me, and came back to my side.


"Miss St. Felix, how I wish I were your brother."

"I wish I *had* a brother, any sort of brother would do. Why do you wish that you were that desirable relative, Captain Brancepeth?"

"Because then I should be privileged to say, what, as a mere friend, I may not say."

"Oh, yes, you may. You may say what you like to me."

"May I? well, do not think that I abuse that permission, in reminding you that it is not usual, not prudent, in a beautiful young woman to send such a message to a young man, with whom her acquaintance



is so slight as is yours with M. de Montreuil."

"He is not a young man," I said, and added with a spiteful intention, "Why, he is nearly as old as you are!"

"I am glad you think me so venerable," he resumed with a smile, "because you will be less likely to dispute my authority on points of worldly experience. Dear Miss St. Felix," (he made a movement as if to take my hand, but checked himself in time, thinking perhaps, that he was not yet quite old enough for that), "dear Miss St. Felix, you are so young, so innocent, so impulsive, that it is the duty of your friends to guard you against dangers, which you have not learnt to foresee."

I interrupted him with impatience, for I did not relish this calm sermonizing of his.

"Dangers! What dangers? And what friends have I, who would trouble themselves to guard me against any? I am responsible to no one, Captain Brancepeth, for any folly that I commit, or for any impulse I may choose to indulge."

"Yes," he answered gravely, "you are responsible to all good women, to all innocent girls for the exercise of a self-restraint which is exacted of you by society."

"But I am doing no harm in asking M. de Montreuil to call. Willie Gillespie often calls, and so does Charlie Stanton."

"No harm, certainly. But reflect—may not the Count's vanity—he is a Frenchman, too!—lead him to misinterpret your extreme impatience to see him again?"

"Ah!" I cried, laughing, "I see you know little of M. de Montreuil; go and

give him my message. And if, when you have spent half-an-hour in his company, you still think there is any fear of his misinterpreting it—why, then——”

“Then,” he said eagerly, “you will retract it?”

“No, I shall not, but I shall think you very undiscerning, and I will not trust your choice of friends—or brothers—for me!”

Bertha re-entered the room while I was speaking; and Captain Brancepeth quitted it without further remonstrance. I was sullenly silent all the rest of the morning, angry with myself for my flippancy; angry with Captain Brancepeth for preaching at me; and angry with Bertie for having subjected me to his reproof. I am afraid he thinks me a horrid girl—as giddy and thoughtless as any hair-brained

school-girl can be, and perhaps likely to turn out altogether evil.

What would he think if he knew that I had used *that word*, which he probably supposes to be a mere characteristic utterance of Ella's. And, for all that, I wish, more than ever, that I had courage to take the blame of it on myself. I *feel* that he has no respect for her, and it is so ungenerous of me, knowing what I *do* know, to suffer one hair's breadth of unmerited reproach to rest on her. Oh, one day, soon, I *must* confess to him! I wonder what he will say of my "impulses" then.

CHAPTER XIV.

HER HERO.

"I am a most veracious person, and
Totally unacquainted with untruth."

SHELLEY.

I HAD recovered my temper in the afternoon, and when Captain Brancepeth returned, he found me quietly employed in the useful, or ornamental, task of embroidering a collar of beads for a Persian kitten that Lady Waldron had presented to Bertha, who had gone out to drive with her, while Charlie Stanton, who had


come over for the day, was sitting with me, telling me all, which was not much, of the Ashfield gossip, and the inevitable Mrs. Judson kept guard over the proprieties at her work-table in the window. But I suppose she thought either that three were a sufficient quorum for decorum, or that Captain Brancepeth was himself qualified to act as a preserver of etiquette, for when he came in she rose and retired to her lair.

He paused at the threshold of the door, and looked at me, half-comically, half-penitently.

“Am I permitted to enter this sanctuary, Miss St. Felix?”

“No admittance, except on business. Mr. Stanton came with a message from Liz—have you a message for me?”

He took courage from my mild and



benignant aspect, and drew a chair to the table beside me.

“Your friend sends word that he will be with you to-morrow morning.”

“*He?*” repeated Charlie. “What friend is that?”

“My good fellow,” said the last comer, “I have made no inquiries about the message you brought Miss St. Felix, please to respect mine.”

“I hope you have not sent for the doctor,” said Charlie.

“No reserve is necessary,” I replied coolly, “I asked M. de Montreuil to call and see me, Charlie, is that odd?”

“Odd?” repeated young Stanton very heartily, “not that I know of, unless he refused to come; and that would be very odd, especially as his dog is here.”

"His *what?*" repeated the Captain in amazement.

"His dog," said Charlie, "that's Bertie. We tease her by calling her 'the blind man's dog.'"

"Just like one of your elegant jests. Well, Captain Brancepeth, whose is to be the 'retractation,' yours or mine?"

He held up his finger with a deprecatory gesture and said,

"M. de Montreuil is a most interesting person, but I see nothing French about him but his name."

"And his grace, and sensibility," I suggested.

"Nay, Miss St. Felix, let us hope that you do not think those merits are confined to Frenchmen?"

"I should hope not indeed!" cried Charlie.
"All the good there is in Frenchmen

we have thrashed into them during the war !”

Said I scornfully, “ You might have said that to Captain Brancepeth, Charlie—you had not much to do with thrashing Frenchmen ; and, moreover, you were thrashed yourself, not so long ago !”

“ That is Brancepeth’s trade, so he ought to excel in it,” laughed good-humoured Charlie. “ What makes you so vicious since he came in, Molly Machree, you were as amiable as possible before ; are you vexed that he has not brought back the blind Count with him ? I say Brancepeth, ware Frenchmen, if she should be in love—”

“ Nonsense !” I interrupted hastily, for I did not know what he might be going to say. “ I have been in love for years. I

have only one love—and that will be for my life!"

"And who the deuce is the blessed man?" asked Charlie.

"He is—he is—Lord Byron!"

At which atrocious falsehood Mr. Stanton sprang to his feet,

"Oh, come! when the girls begin to rave about Lord Byron, I think it is time to bolt. I am going to the targets—will you come and shoot, Brancepeth?"

"No, indeed. I think we have had enough of shooting for a long time," answered the Captain; and Charlie laughed, nodded at me, and went his way.

Captain Brancepeth being thus left alone with me ought, in consistency, to have likewise departed—should he not? but he did not move. Perhaps from absence of mind, as he sat apparently counting the

beads on a string he had taken from my work-basket."

He looked up suddenly.

"Is that true, Miss St. Felix?"

"Is what true?"

"That you are in love with Lord Byron?"

"How can you be so absurd? Of course it is not true."

"Not so absurd, Madam. I have heard of young ladies who have actually refused real lovers for the sake of an imaginary attachment to that Lord."

"I don't think the 'real lovers' had much loss in ladies whose imagination was so very much in excess of their common sense. Still, I ought not to say so—for possibly you might think that my attachment, though Lord Byron is not its object, is very nearly as imaginary."

This I said with the most serious gravity, and was rewarded for the effort by the look of surprise, curiosity, and—I do believe—discomposure in my sailor friend's eyes.

Captain Brancepeth is evidently one of those ridiculous beings who never doubt any assertion of one whom they trust, if only made with sufficient show of earnestness.

But as he said nothing—only stared—I answered his mute inquiry.

“Yes. I first met the only man I can ever love, thirteen years ago.”

Then he laughed.

“That was a precocious attachment, indeed—why, you were a baby!”

“I was five years old.”

“Aye? and what age might be the

‘blessed creature,’ as Stanton would call him?”

“Oh, that I cannot tell you! I was not at that period of my life a very good judge of age; and as I have never seen or heard of my hero since—”

“What fidelity! Do you remember what he was like, then?”

“Not very clearly; but I am perfectly familiar with his image as he is now.”

“Could you describe him?”

“To be sure. I know he must be very tall—taller than M. de Montreuil, and as slight. He has fair hair, curling over a very high forehead, and large, full, blue eyes. Oh, I should recognise him anywhere!”


Talk of the vanity of women, Jenny. At this portrait of my fancied choice—a

portrait which I had purposely made as unlike as possible to Captain Brancepeth, I distinctly saw a cloud pass over his face; but it was gone in a moment.

“Well,” he said, “should I meet the original of your sketch, I will not fail to tell him of the good fortune that awaits him when he comes forward to claim it. But what is his name?”

“I do not know. I wish I did—for he saved my life!”

“Indeed? Then I wish *I* knew it, that I too might express the gratitude which—I mean—in the name of all your friends—” and then, to cover the slight confusion he betrayed at his own warmth of manner, he added, “Will you not tell me that youthful romance of yours—it must be interesting?”



I became really serious then, as I answered,

“It was a dreadful accident—almost the first in my life that I clearly remember. Probably because it made so distinct an impression on me, and I have never willingly spoken of it to this day.”

“Forgive me,” he said kindly. “I was misled by the playfulness of your tone. I did not mean—”

“Oh, but I will tell it you—only I should not like to talk of it before people I did not care for, like Charlie, or——”

And I stopped, colouring violently at having made even such an admission of preference for him as that; but I rallied immediately and plunged into my narrative.

“My father was sending me home from

Jamaica to his father in England—a fleet of merchant vessels was sailing under convoy, (there was war, you know, with France), and there were no ladies—no women even on board the ship in which he sent me, except a sister-in-law of the Captain's, who had married in Jamaica, and was ordered to England for her health. In fact, she was dying—though I suppose my father did not know it—or, perhaps, he had no choice.”

“Well? And your hero was on board, I suppose?”

“No, he was not. Of course, I was a great pet with the Captain and the men, and as my nurse was always ill in her cabin, I ran wild about the decks great part of my time. But I was very fond of the sick woman, and very sorry for her. I used to sit by her bedside and she used to tell me

little stories, and teach me little hymns, when she was able.

“But one day she lay and moaned, and looked so bad, that I was frightened, and crept up to the deck. There was great confusion there; men were running up and down, and getting the boats ready; and there was smoke, and, I think, flames. I stumbled over a rope, at the Captain’s feet, and he swore at me; and in my fright and grief I went down again, and called my nurse. But she did not answer; and the smoke grew thicker, and I ran on deck again.

“The boats were making off—the ship was in flames, and—by the mistake of one of the sailors in the last boat, who thought he had seen me get into the other—I was left alone with my dying nurse in the


burning ship. Do you wonder that I can still vividly remember that?"

"No, indeed. But you were saved by—?"

"I can give you no coherent account of what followed. A boat was sent off from one of the vessels of our convoy, but the flames had made so much way, that no one would venture to board the deserted vessel—until I was descried on the deck screaming—as well I might—with terror."

"You have retained that faculty of screaming," put in my auditor, with a smile.

"And then a youth, an officer, I suppose, in command of the boat, sprang *alone* on board of the flaming vessel, and would have caught me in his arms, but I slipped from his grasp, and flew down



to the cabin, calling on my nurse to get up and come with us. The youth, or boy, or whatever he was, pursued me, and carried me to his own boat, and pushed off, and I was saved.

“But, oh! Captain Brancepeth, I shudder to this day to think that the poor woman was left to that frightful death. That is the reason I never like to talk of that incident of my childhood.”

A silence.

Then Captain Brancepeth inquired.

“Can you feel it so deeply at this distance of time?”

“I shall always feel it. You think I am light, because I am gay-hearted; but lightness, frivolous lightness, and gaiety of spirits, are not what Willie calls ‘convertible terms,’ are they?”

"I hope not. What was the name of the ship?"

"I think it was the 'Medea,' or the 'Mynheer,' or some such name."

"The 'Medea,' and the 'Mynheer,' are not convertible terms assuredly," laughed my companion, "but I remember hearing of a homeward bound ship called the 'Medea,' being burnt as you describe, and I heard—from one of the crew—that the woman on board was dead before the child was rescued."

"You heard that? Oh, then, you know the ship to which my hero belonged? You may even know *him*. The only man I shall ever love?"

"I am afraid," answered the Captain, "that I do not know that most happy man; the only man you will ever love!" he repeated, slowly.


Then, abruptly changing his tone.

“And you never saw him, or heard of him again? Is not that strange?”

“I saw him for a day or two, I believe, on board his own ship, when I was taken there; but I was almost immediately transferred to another merchant-vessel, and we were not far from the end of the voyage. But once—oh, I shall never forget my disappointment—my cruel disappointment.”

“Tell me that.”

“The nurse came one day, and told me to put on my best sash, because I was to go down to grandpapa, who had a gentleman to dine with him—the gentleman who had saved my life on the voyage. I went down—oh, so eagerly! and grandpapa called out, ‘But for this gentleman, Mary, you



would have been burnt alive. It is Captain Forbes, of the —— (something, I forget the name of the ship) ‘and you must give him a nice kiss.’ And—it was not my hero at all, but a hideous man, with a red face, and a blue nose!”

“Poor Forbes!” laughed Captain Brancepeth. “And did you kiss him?”

“Kiss him?” I cried, impetuously, “no, indeed, I—I——”


And I stopped short, and crimsoned up to the roots of my hair.

Captain Brancepeth looked a little surprised, and greatly amused, at what he doubtless took for a kind of retrospective modesty.

But it was nothing like that. The fact is, I had very nearly betrayed myself, by avowing the horrible truth, which

was, that in my childish exasperation of disgust and disappointment, I did not kiss Captain Forbes—I *swore at him!*

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CHAPTER XV.

A CHANGE OF PARTNERS.

M. DE MONTREUIL has received my confidence, which appeared to touch him deeply, and he has promised to use his best endeavours to discover what has been the fate of my unhappy mother.

“If,” he said, “she married the Hon. — it would be easy to find out what had become of her. Your English aristocracy are easily traced in

their alliances. What was her maiden name?"

I could not tell.

"But, my dear Miss St. Felix," he observed, "is not this perfect ignorance of your family history rather unusual?"

"Perhaps not, under the circumstances, M. de Montreuil. I have always understood that my parents had no near relations, and I was sent to my grandfather before I was old enough to remember any distant connections of my mother's—if she had any—in Jamaica. My grandfather was old, and saw no society, and I was sent to school when he died, among strangers; and have lived among strangers ever since."

"But did your father never write to you?"

“Never. His regiment was ordered to Spain when we parted; and he died shortly afterwards.”

The Count reflected. Then he inquired,

“Who is your guardian? Would not he be the best person to apply to for the information you require?”

“My guardian? I do not know him—at least—I hardly know him. He is a banker. I can give you his name and address. Mr. Curling, Lombard Street. Had not you better call on him—if you will take the trouble?”

“I should not count it any trouble if it would be any use; but—it would be a strange proceeding to make so delicate an inquiry of a gentleman who does not know me. He might na-

turally, deny my right to make it. Suppose you write to him yourself?"

From this suggestion, obvious as it may appear, I could not help shrinking. I had never had any correspondence with Mr. Curling; all the arrangements necessary to make for me had been carried out through my governess and Mrs. Shelden. My guardian had seemed always to look on me as literally, as well as legally, an "infant." I pleaded also, that he would almost certainly enclose his reply to any letter I should write to him to Mrs. Shelden, as his communications had always been addressed to her, and I did not wish her to share this painful secret. However, as M. de Montreuil still urged on me the expediency of making my own personal inquiry through my guardian,

and promised that his own should not be delayed by it in other quarters, I at last despatched the following note to Mr. Curling's office.

"Dear Sir.

"Will you kindly inform me what was my dear mother's maiden name, the date of her death, and whether she has left any relations, either in Jamaica or in England? I attribute my grandfather's silence on these points to the probability that he disliked my father's marriage. At all events, he never spoke of my mother to me.


"Your's truly

"MARY ST. FELIX.

"J. W. Curling, Esq.,

Bank, Lombard Street, City.

"And now tell me," said the Count, when




I had read over the note to him, "what further action will you take in this matter, if you learn that your mother has re-married, and is prospering—in a worldly sense—in a higher circle than your own? I do not ask, what will you do if you find her poor, friendless, desolate; for I know that your generous interest in her is chiefly excited by the wish to help and console her; but if she needs no help from you—what then?"

My eyes filled with tears, as I answered,

"In that case there is nothing more to do. I shall feel then, that it was not the momentary impulse of temptation alone that made me, and leaves me, for ever motherless."

M. de Montreuil was about to make some rejoinder, when a sudden brightness



came into his face, as he turned it eagerly to the door, which opened softly, and Bertha entered. Her light footfall had been noiseless to *me*.

"I am afraid I am interrupting you," she said, "but I was ordered to come. Sir Locksley is with Lady Waldron in the library, and he wishes for permission to visit you, Mary, and to be presented to M. de Montreuil."

"I would excuse him, for my part," I answered, petulantly, "but, of course, I have no right to withhold from M. le Comte the advantage of such an acquaintance."

While I spoke, a slight expression of surprise flitted over the blind man's speaking features; then, his whole soul seemed listening in his face, as he turned it towards Bertha.

She smiled, and replied quietly,
"Then I will tell him he may come up."

And in another moment or two, the Baronet's step—not by any means noiseless—came clanking, and jingling into my "sanctuary," as my friend calls it—following Bertha, like a vampire bat in the track of a white dove. Oh, Jenny, how I do loathe that man! He shook hands with me, of course—I gave him my left hand—(my right shoulder was the one that was hurt, you know,) and then covertly wiped it from his touch, on the skirt of my dress.


He welcomed M. de Montreuil, however, with the well-bred grace he can assume when he chooses—with which, I suppose, he won poor Gabrielle's heart—and invited him to stay and dine. M. de Montreuil

having accepted the invitation, he carried him off to present him to Lady Waldron, and I was left alone with Bertie.

Now, according to regulation, I should dine in my own apartments, and Bertie with me to keep me company ; but well I knew, that the heart of M. de Montreuil's little "dog," (as that rude Charlie nicknames her) would be with her blind master—though she would assuredly take offence if I intimated my suspicions of that fact.

So I took pity on the poor child—a pity not altogether unmingled with self-interest ; and declared that I felt so much stronger, that I would give my friends the agreeable surprise of seeing me again at the general table. And, when the dinner-bell rang—down I went on Bertie's arm.

I was received with great applause ; but a



disaster quite unforeseen by me, had nearly spoiled my evening. The party was not numerous—the gentlemen guests who had last arrived were all strangers to me. One of them took Ella in to dinner. M. de Montreuil was assigned to Lady Waldron—and then—oh, horror! our host, as in duty bound, advanced to give his arm to me.

I involuntarily recoiled, and Sir Locksley must have observed the movement, for he stopped short, and said with a forced laugh,

“Miss St. Felix, I will be very generous. Brancepeth, I waive my rights in your favour; but I will not say that I shall not seek consolation.”

And therewith he led Bertha to the place of honour by his side, doubtless to the surprise of the company, and I fancied,

by her eyes, to the displeasure of Gabrielle.

I daresay all the uninitiated inferred that Captain Brancepeth was my accepted lover; but he did not seem to be in the least embarrassed by the possibility of such an inference; and as for me, to confess the truth, I rather liked it.

I suppose, however, that he had as much of my conversation at dinner as he cared for, for he did not join me in the drawing-room later; and I was left alone on a sofa with M. de Montreuil beside me, he being looked upon by the company as my special visitor. I fear he did not find me very amusing, for after a short silence, as I sat pensively playing with Moustache's silky ears, he said,

"Are you tired, Miss St. Felix? have you



not taxed your strength rather too much this evening?"

"I am always tired!" I answered, pettishly. "I daresay I am tired of this place — I have been here so long."

"I assure you," answered M. de Montreuil politely, "that all your friends at Ashfield have found your stay here very long, but we hope to have you back among us soon now."

"We? Ah, M. le Comte, I shall not be able to reckon you among my Ashfield friends much longer, shall I?"

"Until the summer at least; and I shall, I trust, often revisit the old home which is so dear to me."

"Until one of your charming country

women's attractions induce you to form a new and dearer home in your native land?"

I knew even while I was uttering this vulgar platitude, that it was in the worst possible taste; but I was conscious of an inner discord somewhere, which prompted me to make myself disagreeable.

My companion answered sadly, but calmly.

"No, Miss St Felix, I shall never ask any lady to share the darkened lot which is all I have to offer."

"But if she loved you?"

"Loved me? Oh, no, Miss St. Felix—ladies love heroes who can fight for them—like our host and our gallant sailor friend; men who have won honour and distinction; men whose names they are proud to accept;

not a poor, blind fellow, to whom they give their hands—to lead him to the chimney-corner. Ah—!”

That “Ah!” was called forth by a musical peal of girlish laughter from Bertha; a very unusual sound from her, for Bertha rarely laughed aloud. Her mirth was apparently excited by something Sir Locksley had said, which was also unusual, for Sir Locksley was as little remarkable for gifts of wit or humour, as Bertha was for a keen appreciation of such qualities.


I glanced towards the group.

Captain Brancepeth was seated by the table, turning over a huge portfolio of engravings for Miss Vanston’s amusement, and as she bent over them, her long golden ringlets almost touched his hand; while from time to time she shook them

back with a simple, child-like grace, and raised her soft eyes to Sir Locksley's bold black ones, as they dwelt upon her, less with admiration than with a kind of curiosity, as on a variety of the feminine species which he could not altogether understand.

Gabrielle was at a little distance, making tea for Lady Waldron, with two or three gentlemen around her; but I am sure that she did not suffer a word or tone of Sir Locksley's to escape her, though she looked perfectly abstracted and indifferent.

It struck me that both these girls were much altered in the few months I had known them. Gabrielle looked almost *old*; and in the lithe grace of her exquisite form there was a kind of hardness, like what you may fancy in the supple coils



of a rattlesnake, when it stiffens itself to strike.

Bertha, too, notwithstanding the extreme simplicity with which Selina delights to array her, looks much more womanly than she did, though still very youthful.

"How merry she is this evening," I remarked. "It is a new thing to see Bertie gay!"

"Do you think so?" asked my companion, with some surprise. "Bertha does not want gaiety, of a quiet kind, and Captain Brancepeth is so lively."

"She is not laughing at him," I said, viciously. "She is talking to Sir Locksley; she seems quite to admire him."

Monsieur de Montreuil paused a moment, then.

"He cannot fail to admire *her*—for she is very lovely, is she not?"

"Yes—as you say, he evidently thinks her so——"

But the "he" in this remark of mine, referred to Captain Brancepeth, who had apparently forgotten my existence in his endeavours to interest Bertha in that hateful picture-book!

Said Monsieur le Comte, interrogatively,

"Sir Locksley is young?"

"Not old, at least!"

"And handsome?"

"He is considered so."

"What do you think of him, Miss St. Felix?"

"I?" I exclaimed with vivacity. "I think him, without exception, the most—" then, checking myself. "Well, I never think about him more than I can help."

Monsieur de Montreuil smiled.

“What a lame and impotent conclusion ! but it reminds me that my question was indiscreet. I see he is no favourite of yours ; but you will not give your reason for disliking the master of the house in which you are a guest ?”

“I could not give my reasons for disliking or liking anybody. That is to say, I have reasons, and good ones ; but I never find them out until my affection, or disaffection, has grown quite independent of them.”

“You like Captain Brancepeth ?”

“Well, yes—do you ?”

“Very much.”

“Give me your reason, then, and it shall serve us both.”



Monsieur de Montreuil laughed a little mischievously I fancied, as he replied,

"I am not sure that I can help you there; a man is seldom liked for the same reasons by his male and female acquaintance. Yet, there is one trait which both unite in admiring, and that is courage. Well, then, Miss St. Felix, shall I say *we* like the Captain because he is brave?"

Naturally, because my companion began to praise my friend, I was tempted to disparage him.

"Oh, as for courage, most men have that. Sailors and soldiers are brave by profession. I should not single out any for special admiration for that—besides, he has his reward, he has won rank, for he is a young captain; though he is an admiral's son, to be sure, which may count for something."

I am afraid my indifference was a little overdone, else why should Monsieur de



Montreuil smile so mischievously, as he rejoined,

“I heard, only yesterday, of an act of bravery on Captain Brancepeth’s part, which you may freely admire, since he won nothing by it, and he was very young at the time.”

“Yes? What was it? Who told you?”

“An old friend of my father’s, whom I met at the United Service Club yesterday; with whom Captain Brancepeth served as second mate, Captain Forbes, of the ‘Vindictive’—my dear Miss St. Felix, how you start! are you in pain?”


“No—nothing,” I said, making a strong effort to control myself. “But this act of courage?”

“Brancepeth was very young then; his ship was one of a squadron that was escorting a



convoy of merchant vessels from the West Indies. One of the convoy took fire, and its crew deserted it, leaving behind them in the confusion—selfish cowards!—a dying woman with a young child in her charge. They would infallibly have perished, Forbes said, but for the gallantry of Brancepeth, who boarded the flaming ship and rescued the child—the nurse was dead—and the ship's gunpowder store exploded and blew all into the air only a few moments after the boat had steered beyond the common danger. You are silent, Miss St. Felix. Have I given you a good reason for liking our friend?"

Liking him! Had I not told him yesterday that he—yes, *he himself*, as the hero of that adventure, was 'the only man I could ever love!' But in reply to Monsieur de Montreuil I merely said, as indifferently as I could,




“Oh, that is no such wonderful trait of courage in a man! Why, I myself—any woman—would dare fire and flood to save a little child! What else did Captain Forbes tell you about Captain Brancepeth?”

The Count laughed archly.

“I shall tell you no more, Miss St. Felix, lest you turn my reasons for liking our friend, into reasons for *disliking* him! I hope you are not always so perverse?”

“I am tired,” I answered. “As you suggested, I have over-exerted myself this evening. I shall slip back to my own room. Make my excuses when I am missed. Mrs. Judson I know, will be waiting for me there; and let me see you in the morning, before you leave. For you remain here the night, Bertie says.”



And with a parting glance towards Bertha, who was still chatting gaily with her two cavaliers, I fled back to my solitude, which seemed more solitary than ever to-night."

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

LONDON :

Printed by A. Schulze, 13, Poland Street.

